

Eighth Meeting of the
United Nations Economists Network (UNEN)

Tuesday, 14 May 2020
9:00 – 11:00 a.m.

Mr. Elliott Harris, Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Chief Economist of the United Nations, noted that the following agenda items would be discussed: (a) Towards the update of the 2008 SNA (System of National Accounts): An overview of the research agenda on the main thematic areas of globalization, digitalization, well-being and sustainability; (b) Update to the concept note for the second phase of UNEN/roster of experts; (c) UNEN's specific contribution to the COVID-19 response of the UN system; (d) Update on preparation of UNEN report for the 75th anniversary of the UN, including the work of the core group and the peer review process; and (e) any other business.

A. Towards the update of the 2008 SNA (System of National Accounts): An overview of the research agenda on the main thematic areas of globalization, digitalization, well-being and sustainability

Mr. Stefan Schweinfest, Director, Statistics Division, DESA, reported on the update of the 2008 SNA and referred to a briefing note that had been circulated to UNEN members prior to the meeting. He noted that with the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the 2008 SNA the statistical community reflected on the relevance of the 2008 SNA in measuring new types of production, trade and financing arrangements arising from globalization, and digitalization. The relevance of the 2008 SNA has been reviewed in the context of measuring well-being and sustainability, poverty, inequality, the creation of jobs, and the use of natural resources. He added that, at its fifty-first session, the United Nations Statistical Commission (2020) endorsed the option of a continuous SNA revision cycle that provides for the drafting of guidance notes on emerging research issues for experimentation by both developed and developing countries. Implementation of the new guidance is expected to be ready for adoption by the Commission in 2025.

Mr. Harris welcomed this innovative approach and suggested that a brief discussion on the 2008 SNA update could be included in the WESP (World Economic Situation and Prospects) or other flagship publications. UNEN members commented on the impressive amount of work that had been done in that area and mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic might provide an opportunity for SNAs to be built into UN work and “build back better” by creating more sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies.

Mr. Ivo Havinga, Statistics Division, DESA, added that good progress has been made in resolving issues related to globalization, digitalization and integrated measures of economic activity, the wellbeing of people and environmental sustainability. It is expected that dedicated Task Teams established for each of the priority areas will be drafting guidance notes on the issues during 2020. He expressed appreciation for broadening the discussion and extending it to UN economists.

Mr. Harris thanked Mr. Schweinfest and Mr. Havinga for the presentation. He stressed that he encouraged alternative thinking in UNEN and linking the work of UNEN to statistical issues.

B. Update to the concept note for the second phase of UNEN/roster of experts

Mr. Harris noted that the concept note has been discussed at the 6th and 7th UNEN meeting on 10 March and 14 April 2020. The 8th meeting is seeking agreement of UNEN members on suggested next steps, as reflected in the note of discussion that was circulated prior to the meeting:

- Carefully consider how UNEN can support the CCA process, e.g. by providing a global context on economic and social issues. Consult DCO on a possible contribution of UNEN to the CCA process.
- Building on the ongoing online consultation with UNEN members on COVID-19, identify areas in the UN system response to COVID-19, where UNEN could leverage the global analytical work on the crisis from the economic and social perspective, and feed into the work being done at the regional and country levels.

Mr. Harris stressed the importance of resisting the likely demand for UNEN to become an integral part of UN country teams. UNEN would leverage system-wide knowledge and make it widely available. He also emphasized that UNEN would not duplicate work that is already being done. It would be important to be strategic in selecting areas where UNEN contributions would be useful. Mr. Harris referred to the thematic briefs that UNEN members had agreed to produce on a number of topics. The thematic briefs could be made available to RCO economists. He also noted that working group leads had agreed to draft one-pagers on the impact of COVID-19 on the respective megatrends of the UNEN report.

UNEN members expressed support for engagement with CCA processes. It was suggested to get the current CCA list from DCO and select a few countries where UNEN involvement could be useful and could be leveraged to other countries. The importance of integrating the work of UNEN into existing work plans was mentioned. It was also stressed that UNEN support to CCA processes should be aligned to existing initiatives.

Mr. Harris referred to the DESA initiative in support of CCA and noted that he would circulate it to UNEN members. He acknowledged that UNEN members had expressed broad support for engagement with CCA processes with the caveat of aligning UNEN involvement to existing mechanisms. Policy inputs should be broadly applicable and would be channeled through the RECs. Mr. Harris noted that he would consult DCO on a possible contribution of UNEN to the CCA process.

C. UNEN's specific contribution to the COVID-19 response of the UN system

Mr. Harris thanked the working group leads who had prepared the one-pagers on COVID-19 and biodiversity, and on COVID-19 and inequality (circulated prior to the meeting). He encouraged other working group leads to prepare one-pagers on COVID-19 and frontier technologies, demographic trends, and urbanization. Mr. Harris also asked to continue the discussion initiated at the 7th UNEN meeting on any areas in the UN system response to COVID-19, where UNEN could leverage the global analytical work on the crisis from the economic and social perspective, and feed into the work being done at the regional and country levels.

The question was raised how UNEN work on COVID-19 could be aligned with the Secretary-General's COVID-19 policy briefs. A proposal was made to discuss the COVID-19 crisis in the larger context of risk we face. This could be the topic of a thematic brief. It was suggested to develop a separate thematic brief on COVID-19. UNEN members agreed that the issue of COVID-19 would have to be treated in the UNEN report in an integrated manner. It was suggested that the work of various entities on COVID-19 should be shared more broadly.

D. Update on preparation of UNEN report for the 75th anniversary of the UN, including the work of the core group and the peer review process

Mr. Harris reported that the core group in charge of integrating the chapters of the UNEN report had started its work. Comments of the core group on the individual chapters would be shared with the working group leads in the coming days. The timeline for revisions was tight as the chapters would be sent for peer review around 20 May. In June, the chapters would be further revised taking into account the results of the peer review. The entire report would also undergo peer review. Editing was foreseen for July and translation and printing of the executive summary for August. Mr. Harris noted that he was working with Fabrizio Hochschild to coordinate the outreach for the report.

E. Any other business

Mr. Harris concluded the meeting by thanking UNEN members for their active participation. He reiterated that he would speak with DCO regarding a possible contribution of UNEN to the CCA process. He would also re-circulate the list of thematic briefs to UNEN members and ask for updates to the list.