E-Discussion on the 2018 ECOSOC Main Theme

From global to local: supporting sustainable and resilient societies in urban and rural communities

Summary

I.   Introduction

The main theme for the 2018 ECOSOC session is "From global to local: supporting sustainable and resilient societies in urban and rural communities". Through this theme, the Council and the ECOSOC functional commissions and expert bodies will facilitate global engagement in support of sustainability and resilience, bringing together all levels of Government, the private sector, civil society, the United Nations system and other actors. The 2018 ECOSOC session, which culminates in the High-level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF) held under the auspices of ECOSOC and the ECOSOC High-level Segment in July, will provide policy guidance, elaborating institutional and other requirements, and promoting operational support for achieving sustainable development. The essence will be captured in the Joint HLPF - ECOSOC HLS Ministerial Declaration.

In support of the 2018 session of ECOSOC, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) convened an e-Discussion on the 2018 main ECOSOC theme from 26 March to 13 April 2018. The discussions, entitled "From global to local: supporting sustainable and resilient societies in urban and rural communities", focused on current and emerging challenges to building sustainable and resilient societies, and the actions that need to be taken by national and subnational institutions to translate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into reality. The e-Discussion was moderated by Ms. Marion Barthelemy, Director of the Office for Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development, UN DESA and Mr. Patrick Keuleers, Director of the Governance and Peacebuilding Cluster, UNDP, supported by their respective offices and the Development Impact Group, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, UNDP.

The e-Discussion generated approximately 100 contributions and approximately 2,240 visitors from 154 countries. The Discussion engaged dozens of participants from civil society, local governments and their associations, the private sector, academia and the UN system. Many shared best practices and provided concrete suggestions for achieving the SDGs, especially at the local level.

This summary provides an overview of the contributions by the participants in relation to the following discussion questions presented by the moderators at the beginning of the e-Discussion:

- What are the current and emerging challenges to building sustainable and resilient societies?
- What steps can be taken, especially at the local level to address these challenges?
- How are national and subnational institutions translating the sustainable development goals into concrete actions?
- What institutional frameworks for sustainable development are needed, and how can they be built?

The views expressed do not represent the views of the moderators or their institutions.

II.   Common messages and themes

To build sustainable and resilient societies it is best to consider the local level as a key site of delivery. The local level is the reference point for any development action ensuring the full ownership of development agendas, their implementation and monitoring. For that to happen, a clear effort must be made to engage local governments in the implementation of the SDGs, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and related international agreements.

In particular, local and sub-national governments, in coordination with all levels of governance, are vital for promoting sustainable development and building resilient societies in their territories, while facilitating and encouraging the full and active engagement of their communities.

Further common messages and themes include:

- Building sustainable and resilient societies at the local level requires the strengthening and deepening of local democracy and decentralization worldwide.

- Sustainable and resilient societies are societies that are able to adapt, evolve and have the capacity to recover quickly from any adversity or risk.

- Building knowledge and awareness are key to building sustainable and resilient societies.

- Integrating disaster risk reduction across UN system efforts in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can assist in providing practical and tangible ways to bridge the development and humanitarian communities.

- A greater emphasis on community involvement in needs assessment and in planning, execution and monitoring of SDG activities is necessary, as each individual and actor has a role to play in the achievement of the goals.

- Developing the capacities of stakeholders and actors in local governance, including civil society and local and sub-national governments, is essential to lead advocacy, resource mobilization, community sensitization as well as implementation and monitoring of plans and projects.

- To be able to ensure the follow-up of the global agendas, and particularly mobilize the means of implementation, local governments need more disaggregated data from within their local communities.

- Local and sub-national governments need to be transparent and accountable and must make themselves accessible to their citizens and respond to their needs and priorities, especially with regards to health, education, transport, environment and food security.

- Local governments require adequate financing mechanisms to build responsive and accountable institutions, and more broadly to drive SDG localization in their territories.

- New technologies, such as knowledge sharing platforms and Artificial Intelligence, could enable greater understanding and knowledge creation and sharing for sustainable development.

- To implement a people-centered approach to sustainability and resilience, it is necessary to have a strong commitment by national and local actors underpinned by relevant legal provisions, methodological tools and effective capacities in public institutions, civil society and communities.

III.   Key messages and policy recommendations by question

1.   What are the current and emerging challenges to building sustainable and resilient societies?

- Ensuring coherence between global agendas, national strategies and priorities, and local and regional strategies and priorities: The SDGs, while universal, are not mandatory. Each country, and within each country, each local or sub-national government must examine its needs and priorities in relation to the Goals and in consideration of national sustainable development targets.

- Although national governments remain the main actors in governance, urban areas are taking on a new and more important role than in the past. Particularly, the process of urbanization is becoming increasingly complex because of its rapid pace, and its related – and similarly complex – metropolisation process.

- Building strong and responsive local and sub-national governments: they are vital to drive local development processes in their territories and to ensure the inclusion and action of all relevant local stakeholders.

- Further empowering the local level to raise awareness and commitment, to engage communities and vulnerable and marginalized groups, to invest in peer-to-peer learning to maximize knowledge exchange, to provide adequate financial and human resources to take on all the tasks and responsibilities put on them by regulations, institutional mechanisms and governance systems. Capacities of local stakeholders and human capital need to be strengthened and supported as a continuous long-term process.

- The SDGs cannot be institutionalized if they are not widely known, therefore, a massive campaign at the local level needs to be launched for people, governments and the private sector to know what the SDGs are and why they are important.

- In 2017, only 41% of surveyed countries involved their local level of governance in the coordination and follow-up bodies or entities created ad hoc for the achievement of the SDGs. Even in terms of reporting, the percentage is worrisome: as few as 58% of the countries reporting to the HLPF in 2017 had specifically involved local governments in the preparation of their Voluntary National reviews (VNRs), or even mentioned them in the document as part of the governance mechanism for the process of implementation.

- The localization of development objectives also involves governance work from the bottom up to the intermediate and central powers. The great challenge is to coordinate inter-governmental policies among different levels of governance that together should contribute to the achievement of the prioritized development targets both at the sub-national and national levels.

- Advocating for working on the humanitarian-development nexus, and the concept of "resilience" to better unite the nexus and align associated funding instruments. This involves unpacking layers of resilience, also relevant at the local level, such as life-cycle resilience (individual level), community resilience (group level) and institutional resilience (societal level).

- Recognizing the importance of gender equality in order to achieve sustainable and inclusive societies.

- Taking local geological and climatic conditions into account, it is of high importance to develop renewable energy (solar, wind etc.) In addition to reducing the negative impact on the environment, this will ensure energy security (SDG-7, 13). The scientific and technical developments in this field should be supported.

- Ensuring the support of businesses, as businesses both maintain and use public goods. Businesses also use natural and social capital; hence, they must preserve and maintain them and, if necessary, increase and expand them.

- Establishing indicators for measuring the outcomes of local efforts. Local actors should be involved in the process of measuring the progress of the different targets. This is an area for synergies between local officials, practitioners and academia.

- Disaggregated data is a precondition for implementing the SDGs. However, in many countries data are incomplete or several years old. Extensive and deliberate mapping efforts, with local governments empowered to be direct collectors of refined, co-owned and co-defined data, can be an important step towards identifying and providing support to those furthest behind.

2. **What steps can be taken, especially at the local level, to address these challenges?**

- Empowering local stakeholders for resilience-building, which must be coupled with a broader effort at strengthening core systems of local governance and local development: In this regard, local and sub-national government associations and networks can play a vital part to make their constituencies strong, dynamic actors with responsibility, skills, powers and resources.

- All levels of government and communities at large need to become acquainted with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and related development agendas. This will allow governments to incorporate the SDGs into development plans and programs, and the private sector and people at large to ensure their application and monitoring. The engagement with stakeholders and partners in implementing the SDGs should equally pay attention to sociocultural and economic factors that impact the process.

- The role and active participation of local and sub-national governments is going to be essential for the achievement of the SDGs. It is calculated that about 65% of the current targets and objectives can only be attained at the local level, via local policies, with the involvement of all local stakeholders and actors and with the full engagement of both their citizens and the international community.

- Realities of urbanization and metropolisation reinforce the need for local authorities to play a leading role in building more inclusive, resilient and sustainable territories. But it also further reinforces the need to introduce metropolitan areas as the appropriate territorial scale to face these challenges. In this context, there are four common points that any strategy must take into account: leadership and political will, short- and long-term vision of the territory, cross-cutting and integrated legal and institutional frameworks, and technical and financial resources and capacities.

- Awareness and advocacy; mutual learning and the ability to generate ownership, understanding and dissemination; and constant monitoring and review of available information and existing practices are essential tools used by local and sub-national government networks, such as United Cities and Local Governments and the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, in partnerships with UN Agencies, UNDP and UN-Habitat to address the challenges of development, sustainability, resilience and inclusiveness.

- Communicating in a simple way the rich and complex information of development agendas, creating very simple materials that summarize, even graphically - by means of infographics and web based platforms, for example - the why, the what and the how of the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Agenda, with the participation of all groups of interest.

- Working with the media and civil society, to improve community awareness and promote the positive effects that can be expected by a durable and resilient society.

- Supporting peer-to-peer exchanges and trainings, so that those local policy makers and practitioners who have been introduced to the SDGs and other international development agendas can spark change and innovation in their own local policies, as well as further disseminate the message by training others and achieving a multiplier effect.

- Financing for development needs to be more comprehensive to include innovative and sustainable instruments to achieve the global agendas, in particular the 2030 Agenda. Enhancing local government finances will be crucial if cities are to host around 1,4 billion new urban dwellers over the next 20-30 years. In terms of efficiency, stronger municipal finance and sub-national fiscal systems are crucial for fostering and spreading the values of inclusive and resilient urban development. In terms of local democracy and renewing a bounding trust between citizens and the state, municipal finance is an opportunity for more participatory approaches, building synergies between local public interest and national strategies as well as enhancing transparency.

3. **How are national and subnational institutions translating the sustainable development goals into concrete actions?**

- There have been significant advances in terms of SDG-related awareness-raising, especially led by local and sub-national governments' associations. In many countries, local and sub-national governments have developed fora, outreach campaigns, dedicated charters, SDG "tours", initiative-mapping, training and communication resources that have helped mobilize even more local stakeholders and actors, including civil society, associations, the private sector and academia.

- In Germany, for instance, the 2030 Agenda has drawn support for tens of municipalities on 13 initiatives that address awareness-raising, networking, and concrete policies for social, economic, political and cultural sustainability. As another example, Madagascar developed a communication programme, Madagate, dedicated to the engagement of local governments in the implementation of the SDGs. It has helped mobilize even more local stakeholders and actors, including civil society, associations, private sector and academia.

- For many governments, the 2030 Agenda is an important governmental planning tool, facilitating the prioritization of government actions, the optimization of public spending and the interaction between government agencies. Many local and sub-national governments have been institutionally receptive: they have developed tailored strategies and plans at the local level, adapting or aligning local priorities, objectives and action plans to the requirements of the SDGs and the other global agendas. In turn, this has had positive impact on vertical institutional interactions, stimulating adaptation and alignment also at the national level.

  - In Colombia: as of 2017, 32 departments and 31 department capital cities had already adopted local plans that included localized, place-based SDG targets. Another example comes from Botswana, where the national association of local authorities (BALA) remarks that the recently-developed National Framework for Local Economic Development defines actions in support of the SDGs, and that since April 2017 it has been deployed in four pilot districts and will be soon rolled out to the rest of the country. And in Brazil the City of Barcarena is making strides to ensure the alignment of municipal plans to the SDGs.

- Overall, many local and sub-national governments have used the SDGs and the global goals as the key platform to begin implementing actual policies that adapt locally the targets and requirements of the Goals; to collect data to report and review localization and implementation (sometimes complementing the indicators system of the UN). They have used the SDGs as drivers of change for a fairer and more equitable distribution of both resources and political responsibilities.

  - For instance, the province of Riau, in Indonesia, in partnership with UNDP, has introduced a provincial SDG Steering Committee, coordinating several workshops and activities with constant engagement of civil society, academia, businesses and other local stakeholders.

- Only by adopting a holistic approach is it possible to translate global standards into contextually sound actions at the local level and ensure that forward-looking solutions can be implemented and used to inform decision-making at the wider sub-national and national scale.

  - A current example can be found in Asuncion (Paraguay), where the municipality is adopting a multi-stakeholder approach to resilience building (through the City Resilience Profiling Tool). The approach, which relies on data obtained from local authorities, as well as from other actors like energy companies, industries, sub-national and national governments, is in fact helping local authorities to convene training sessions and workshops to illustrate the resilience agenda on water hazards, and to collect the required data and sensitize key partners from different constituencies on resilience-thinking. The result is an enabling environment of mutual trust and information sharing among different groups of stakeholders, and an increased local capacity in resilience.

4. **What institutional frameworks for sustainable development are needed, and how can they be built?**

- Perhaps the most appropriate structure for coordinating national action for sustainable development are National Councils/Commissions for Sustainable Development, and interdepartmental and multilevel commissions. Undoubtedly civil society, local governments and the university sector should be better engaged, and these institutions need to be strengthened.

- At the national level, multi-level governance reforms and territorial approaches to development should clarify the competences devolved and regulatory frameworks applying to sub-national governments to strengthen their powers, resources and capacities. It is therefore important to ensure

a favorable, enabling and facilitating environment for decentralization in support of local governance and sustainable development in its three dimensions. Decentralization, local governance and local public administration must be retained as priority areas on the international agenda over the next few years.

- Building institutional frameworks for the goals requires thinking in terms of multi-level governance, advances in decentralization and local democracy, rights and securing strong local finances. Local governments' associations should be included in the process.

- It remains key to re-think our economic model and encourage an economy that regulates its resources and expenditure and that invests in people by meeting their basic needs in education, health care, and transportation. This would allow communities to engage in the process and have decision making power. Without this, the gap between the poor and the rich will continue to widen and inequalities and fragilities to increase.

- At the core of this effort, we need to recognize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a universal and eternal institutional framework. Even though it was drafted and adopted over 70 years ago, it can still provide a holistic (and timely) guide to translate all adopted goals into reality.

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