

Science Day: Evidence-based Strategies for SDG Acceleration 15 July 2023

What will success for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) look like in 2030? What are potential strategies to ensure the acceleration of SDG implementation is as evidence-based, strategic, and effective as possible?

These questions animated discussions at the first-ever Science Day to convene on the margins of the annual session of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Approximately 120 scientists and academics, civil society representatives, and national government and intergovernmental decision-makers gathered to discuss scientific findings, methodologies, and tools that can help support evidence-based decision making for the SDGs.

Many speakers highlighted that SDG implementation is too slow and lamented that science was not at the heart of the SDGs when they were created. Participants stressed the need to consider how science synthesizers, networks, and bridge builders can be engaged in the science-policy interface, and how trust in science can be rebuilt. Examples were given with respect to the ways in which the SDGs have provided a framework for understanding issues and pursuing transformation in a more holistic way. Several speakers discussed the need for “mission-driven science” or a “big science approach,” in which political objectives are matched with actions, institutions, capabilities, and resources to effectively achieve them.

Based on the discussions, a call to action for HLPF 2023 and the September SDG Summit will be developed in the weeks following the event and shared with participants as well as on the [official website of the SDG Summit](#) as the position paper by the Scientific and Technological Community Major Group. The insights from the event will also inform the 2024 Summit of the Future.

Science Day at HLPF 2023, which met on 15 July 2023 at UN Headquarters in New York, US, was organized by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), UN Development Programme (UNDP), International Science Council (ISC), Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), and UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).



Ambassador **Csaba Kőrösi**, President, UN General Assembly

Report of the Meeting

Opening the first-ever Science Day at the HLPF, Ivonne Lobos Alva, SEI, and Laurel Patterson, UNDP, encouraged participants to use the event to consider how evidence and research can be employed in decision making to drive SDG implementation during the coming seven years.

Opening Plenary

Csaba Kőrösi, UN General Assembly (UNGA) President, told participants he was “here to rock the boat.” He stressed the need to create national transformation strategies based on the SDGs.

- In this regard, he highlighted the need to:
- align national regulations with announced goals;
 - calculate all important externalities;
 - evaluate the impact of our investments across all pillars of sustainability through a “beyond GDP” approach;

In This Issue

| | |
|--|---|
| Report of the Meeting | 1 |
| Opening Plenary | 1 |
| Pathways to Accelerate the SDGs in an Evidence-Based Manner | 2 |
| Closing Plenary | 4 |
| Upcoming Meetings | 4 |



Vivonne Lobos Alva and Laurel Patterson, moderators of Science Day

- identify and prioritize game-changing elements in SDG implementation;
- build transparent road maps for implementation;
- improve science-based validation of implementation activities; and
- modernize the pipeline from science to policy and back.

He highlighted the creation of a [Group of Friends on Science for Action](#) by Belgium, India, and South Africa, stating it has given momentum to the role of science in shaping decisions.

Ambassador Mathu Joyini, Permanent Representative of South Africa to the UN, and Co-Chair of the 2023 Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (STI Forum), highlighted the importance of using pluralist approaches, emphasizing the need for both the natural and social sciences to implement all of the SDGs. She stressed the need for collaboration and creating meaningful partnerships that reduce the North-South divide.

Peter Gluckman, ISC President, noted that the 17 SDGs and 169 targets are political constructs and said science has been marginalized and seen as playing a technical role when the SDGs were negotiated. He stressed the need for knowledge brokers who



Ambassador **Mathu Joyini**, Permanent Representative of South Africa to the UN and STI Co-Chair

can work at the edge of policy and scientific communities, and for a “big science approach” to produce actionable knowledge.

Concluding the session, Patterson asked participants to consider what it would take to make science more central now, as science was not at the heart of the SDGs when they were created. She also asked how the synthesizers, networks, and bridge builders can be connected, and how trust in science can be rebuilt.

Pathways to Accelerate the SDGs in an Evidence-Based Manner

An opening panel set the stage for questions that were subsequently discussed in small groups. Among the issues raised were the importance of mission-driven science, the need to connect with the local level and people’s lived experiences, and the importance of inclusive perspectives for science. The need to build bridges between the scientific and policy communities was discussed, with remembering to ask questions and interrogate how questions have been defined as one suggestion for how to do this.

Maria-Francesca Spatolisano, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, UN DESA, said interlinkages are the way to think about progress, noted the need to strengthen the science-policy-society interface, and highlighted the need for evidence-based solutions based on facts to bring to the attention of decision makers.

Albert van Jaarsveld, Director General, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), noted that the SDGs must be addressed collectively and simultaneously and be locally contextualized. To accomplish these objectives, he stressed the need for capacity to facilitate systems thinking and analysis, nexus exploration, and pathway research. He suggested replicating global networks such as CGIAR to provide funding at a global scale for the SDGs.

Vivi Yulaswati, Deputy Minister for Maritime Affairs and Natural Resources and Head of the National SDG Secretariat, Indonesia, described her country’s process with respect to



Panel on Pathways to Accelerate the SDGs in an Evidence-Based Manner (L-R): **Laurel Patterson**, UNDP; **Albert van Jaarsveld**, Director General, IIASA; **Vivi Yulaswati**, Deputy Minister for Maritime Affairs and Natural Resources, and Head, National SDG Secretariat, Indonesia; **Maria-Francesca Spatolisano**, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, UN DESA; and **Asa Persson**, Deputy Director, SEI

determining indicators for each province and ranking them to figure out which indicators would be used at the national level, resulting in the use of 191 indicators.

Åsa Persson, Deputy Director, SEI, and Member of the Independent Group of Scientists (IGS) for the 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), highlighted several positive impacts the SDGs have already had. She reported that researchers working with energy planning models to help countries develop their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) used the SDG framework for thinking about co-benefits; highlighted that the SDG framework provides a long-term compass; and noted the global framework speaks to local priorities leading some local governments to structure their budgets based on the SDGs.

During the discussion, participants posed a range of questions: How can we promote acceleration with a different mindset and how can data be organized to do this? Are there examples of how to convince governments that deep sea exploitation will harm progress? How can scientists influence the intergovernmental processes at the UN? And how do we incentivize the uptake of research at the UN and at the country level?

In response, panelists highlighted that:

- the UN Statistics Division works with national statistics offices to strengthen capacity of national statistical services;
- we need “mission-driven science,” in which we not only identify targets but also identify required actions to align with the targets and establish the necessary institutions, capabilities, and resources to achieve them; and
- the SDGs provide a framework for understanding issues and how to achieve a just transition in a more holistic manner.

UNGA President Kőrösi emphasized the need for science to intervene when negotiations are close to fruition, in order to provide a reality check on whether the proposed outcome is “hitting the target.” He also noted the need for scientific interventions as an agreement moves to the implementation stage and for real-time, evidence-based assessments of action. He asked if transformation today can be measured, noting that we do not measure interlinkages and indirect impacts, which undermines our capacity to track progress holistically and steer transformations.

Peter Gluckman stressed the need for scientists and policymakers to engage in a continuous and iterative process for science to be relevant and effective in informing policymaking, reminding participants that policymakers cannot always wait for scientists to finish their research and studies.

Ambassador Joyini noted that “who is in the room” is important, stressing the need to engage both permanent representatives and experts and ensure they are speaking the same language.

Based on these scene-setting interventions, participants gathered in small groups, with each discussing one of the following six topics led by experts:

- Activating synergies in the six entry points put forward by the GSDR, led by Jaime Miranda, IGS Chair, and Norichika Kanie, IGS Member;



Peter Gluckman, President, International Science Council

- Navigating multiple crises simultaneously, led by Maria Ivanova, Director, School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs, Northeastern University, and Olivier Dangles, Deputy Chief Science Officer in charge of Sustainability Science, French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development;
- Evidence-based priority setting, led by Marianne Beisheim, Senior Associate, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Åsa Persson, Deputy Director SEI, and Babatunde Abidoye, Global Advisor SDG Integration, UNDP;
- What does acceleration look like for the SDGs? led by Nebojsa Nakicenovic, Emeritus Research Scholar, IIASA, and Andrea Coombes, Senior Researcher, American Institutes for Research;
- Concrete examples to improving underlying critical conditions for SDG implementation (e.g., conflict, digitalization, and equality), led by Paulina Carmona-Mora, Research Scientist, University of California, Davis, and member of the Global Young Academy, and Kazuhiko Takeuchi, President, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES); and
- How can policy coherence save the SDGs? led by Frank Biermann, Director, European Research Council Global Goals Project, and Patrick Paul Walsh, Professor of International Development Studies, University College Dublin, Ireland.



Topic 1: Activating synergies in the six entry points put forward by the Global Sustainable Development Report



The Resistance Revival Chorus performs for participants.

Closing Plenary

Haoliang Xu, Assistant Secretary General and Director of the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, UNDP, opened the closing plenary and presented examples of issues that require research. Noting that 50-60 countries are currently in debt stress, he asked what this situation means for the SDGs. He also highlighted an ongoing project using machine learning to analyze national priority documents to identify government priorities for comparison with national progress on those issues.

Salvatore Aricò, Chief Executive Officer, ISC, highlighted the need for a big science approach applied to transdisciplinary science and to institutionalize the science-policy interface, including through better dialogues between scientists and policymakers.

Åsa Persson, Deputy Director, SEI, noted calls for mission-driven science and for reforms in funding for transboundary science. She highlighted the need for a typology for generating, synthesizing, and using knowledge, emphasizing, in particular, the value of synthesis and creating cumulative knowledge. She also called for research that defines costs of actions, assesses outcomes, provides advice on how to sequence and combine policy interventions, and recommends timetables. In closing, she stressed the need to safeguard the scientific method and maintain trust in science.

UNGA President Kőrösi asked how the next 7.5 years will differ from the first 7.5 years of the SDGs. He said actors' pledges should be different and encouraged each participant to give the Science Day organizers a list of five areas in which they could help policymakers to make the SDG Summit a platform for credible commitment to SDG implementation. In developing these lists, Laurel Patterson, UNDP, encouraged participants to tap into the passion that motivated them to join their field in the first place.

Kelvy Bird, Presencing Institute, introduced her visual depiction (scribe) of the Science Day discussion. She said this "social art" built on the discussion of systems approaches and feed-back loops to illustrate the need to unite, bridge, and break down barriers. She noted the barriers discussed during the day are manmade and said she tried to depict the interdependence that is required for solutions.

Science Day at HLPF 2023 closed at 1:04 pm, following a performance by the Resistance Revival Chorus. A full recording of the event is available [here](#).

Upcoming Meetings

HLPF 2023: Held under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the HLPF is the main UN platform on sustainable development. It has a central role in the follow-up and review of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs. A three-day ministerial segment will convene during the second week. **dates:** 10-20 July 2023 **location:** New York City, US **www:** hlpf.un.org/

SDG Summit: The Summit is the quadrennial meeting of the HLPF under the auspices of the UNGA. The 2023 Summit will be the second since the adoption of the SDGs and will take place at the midpoint of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. **dates:** 18-19 September 2023 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** hlpf.un.org/sdg-summit

Climate Ambition Summit: This event is being organized by the UN Secretary-General during the High-Level week of the UNGA. It is an opportunity for "First Movers and Doers" to report how they are responding to the Secretary-General's call to accelerate climate action. **date:** 20 September 2023 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** <https://www.un.org/pga/77/2023/04/05/letter-from-the-president-of-the-general-assembly-scheduling-of-mandated-meetings-for-hlw78/>

For additional upcoming events, see: sdg.iisd.org