



High Level Political Forum Position Paper 2020



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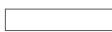










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Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic intensifies the need for accelerated and united action from all stakeholders. In this unique moment in history, we clearly see how nations, economies, health and safety are intrinsically and inevitably interconnected with one another. We also see what is possible when people unite, and we see the dire consequences when profit or nationalism is put before people and the planet. To achieve Agenda 2030, we must prioritize transformative pathways as we work together to save lives and forge inclusive pathways forward.

In examining how NGOs are accelerating action and forging pathways for transformation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we see a multitude of examples of inclusion and stakeholder engagement. Within the vibrant ecosystems of local, national, regional and international NGOs, lessons can be learned about programming, context, impact, and mutually beneficial outcomes. It is furthermore essential that emergency measures should not stifle independent voices, but instead must enable people and communities to raise their concerns and identify their own solutions.

This document results from the inputs of a wide variety of NGOs, analyzing their experiences through the lens of the GSDR entry points. While that work can be identified within each of the multi-target pathways of the GSDR, more often the work and impact of NGOs crosses the lines of individual sectors and shows the interlinked nature of sustainable development. An action that might begin in a pathway of “strengthening human well-being and capabilities” may positively impact the “global environmental commons”. A program that supports “shifting to sustainable and just economies” may be built on a theory of change that involves “sustainable food systems”. Indeed, the most impactful actions by NGOs were multidisciplinary and interlinked, blurring the boundaries of sectors and silo-ed strategies.

At this time, we face not only a pandemic but also ongoing challenges to the achievement of truly sustainable development. For NGOs, the greatest barriers to accelerated action and transformation are the economic barriers of poverty, lack of funding for the work of sustainable development, the need for awareness, gaps and lack of access to quality education, the absence of effective governmental policies, and the lack of political will for action and accountability (see Appendix 1).

Acceleration of the SDGs is accomplished not only through the type of entry point selected, but also, and equally important, through the processes by which we work. Therefore, the NGO-MG calls for a global commitment to:

- Include all stakeholders in the process of sustainable development that impacts their lives, valuing and empowering local capacity, wisdom, culture and contextualizing/localizing action;
- Empower local communities and ensure their right to lead their own sustainable development;
- Prioritize action that is holistic, multi-sectoral and cross-disciplinary;
- Ensure, in our actions, that all life - human, animal, and biosphere - thrives in balance with nature;
- Make systems of support flexible and adaptable to meet complex and evolving situations and needs;
- Use transparency, open access to information and data, and improve communication across sectors and actors;
- Cooperate and collaborate across and within national borders, with all sectors and on all levels, to create long term solutions and resiliency while still supporting immediate needs.

Transformative pathways and accelerated action are built with input from engaged and informed stakeholders and fuelled by the potent combination of local context, expertise, disaggregated and relevant data, appropriate funding mechanisms, and the scaling of effective programming. Key to this and to achieving Agenda 2030 are inclusiveness and local participation as well collaborative effort grounded in human rights and enacted in harmony with nature.

In the sections that follow, NGOs bring together their experiences, the challenges they have faced, and the solutions they have found in our shared work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Section 1

Strengthening Human Well-Being and Capabilities and Ending Poverty in all its Forms and Dimensions

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores how underlying conditions and poverty exacerbate issues associated with achieving the SDGs. These contexts include entrenched poverty, food instability, lack of access to healthcare, clean water, sanitation, energy, and housing, inequitable education and work opportunities, climate change, poor air quality, discrimination, conflict, and institutionalized and casual infringements of human rights. At the heart of these overlapping and intertwined issues are human lives, the natural world and our interconnected ecosystem.

NGOs working toward strengthening human well-being and the reduction of poverty brought forward examples of interrelated systems rather than single sector entry-points. An initiative that electrifies rural medical clinics in Uganda and provides at-home solar lights for new mothers (SDG7), for instance, is improving attended birth rates and maternal and infant health outcomes (SDG3) as well as measurements of women's empowerment (SDG5), educational impacts (SDG4), indoor air pollution (SDG13) and indicators of economic stability (SDG1) (Let There Be Light International). Ecovillage communities in more than 110 countries are employing nature based solutions, sustainable consumption and production practices, and organic regenerative agriculture to increase agricultural productivity, sequester carbon, eat healthier eco and climate friendly vegetarian diets, reduce water usage, produce most of their own renewable energy, take advantage of valuable resources using biological waste processes and restore both degraded ecosystems and natural water cycles. In the process they are greatly increasing the health and well-being of the people living in the community, while ensuring that all people's basic human needs can and will be met. (The Global Eco-Village Network). In Haiti, programs that began with an aim of the empowerment of women girls are using multi-sector support and partnerships to address not just the education of adolescent girls but also the aspects of her well-being including physical health, emotional resilience, cognitive growth and community engagement (LIDE Foundation). Women also were at the center of an initiative that not only improved education for refugees but also improved livelihoods in a green economy (NET Africa). We also see several examples of the uniting of civil society organizations in advocacy and in action that improves human lives by protecting the environment, opening access to information, advocating for more sustainable and circular economies, or giving collective voice to people too often left out of the decisions that determine their lives (Gestos, Commons Cluster, UGENCI, RIPESS, African Climate Policy Center, and Bridge 47).

As NGOs work to "strengthen capabilities", we see a broadening of traditional definitions of education or even capacity building to a more expansive and holistic process of empowerment. Improved access to information and data improved human rights while also creating a means of monitoring transparency, corruption and progress toward the SDGs (Global Forum for Media Development, Gestos). By teaching traditional ways of living, marginalized people not only found a voice, but also were able to educate for conservation and share the values of the traditional knowledge to promote environmental protection and climate resilience (Silambam Asia). Cultural knowledge and respect also were shown to play a role in achieving progress toward the SDGs as a whole (ICOMOS). Strengthening technical skills for migrants and refugees brought about empowerment as well as improving relationships with local authorities (Association Nationale des Partenaires Migrants). Education for global citizenship and the sustainable development goals in several examples took place in informal settings, collectives, communities, or youth organizations, thus, not only serving as skill or knowledge building but also as transformative actions leading to more sustainable and resilient lives (The Millennials Movement, Salesians Missions, Bridge 47).

Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action in Strengthening Human Well-being

Central to the transformative actions shared by NGOs was the principle of people strengthening their own wellbeing. Most initiatives were community-centered, locally implemented and/or locally driven. Local actors were thereby included in decision-making, planning and implementation of projects. Capacity strengthening was characterized by locally driven and people-centered actions and merged local or traditional knowledge with sustainable and innovative practices or skills. Overall, the global issues that impact local lives are being brought into context; conversely, the local wisdom that can bring about a more sustainable world is being shared at a global level. And this was achieved through the following:

1. Input, participation, and leadership from local communities and those who have been left out of systems that ensure wellbeing and opportunities to demonstrate capacity, including women and girls; racial, ethnic, or religious minorities; those of lower socio-economic status, indigenous peoples; migrants, refugees, and internally displaced persons; persons with disabilities; children, youth and older persons; and LGBTQ;
2. Transferring the work of strengthening human wellbeing and reducing poverty into the hands of local community members, and where skill needs to be strengthened in order to do so, providing the education, training, or skills that strengthen their ability to improve their own lives and communities;
3. Applying holistic, cross-disciplinary approaches; partnerships; and multilateral cooperation;
4. Making systems of support flexible and adaptable to adjust to changing situations and changing needs;
5. Aiming to create long term solutions and strengthen skills and capabilities, while supporting immediate needs;
6. Having disaggregated data that reflects the diversity of society and its needs;
7. Contextualization of actions to local cultures and settings with respect for cultures, traditional knowledge and environments;
8. Ensuring the well-being of people by living in balance with a healthy, thriving natural environment.

Challenges and Barriers to Strengthen Human Well-being and Ending Poverty

The challenges faced by NGOs in the work of strengthening human well-being and capacity, and reducing poverty fell into three overriding categories: lack of basic needs, barriers to or absence of education; and lack of multilateral or governmental support or cooperation. The needs most often cited as presenting gaps or barriers through their absence were clean water and sanitation; access to clean energy sources (or any energy source at all); adequate and sustainable food sources; safety and security; and basic human rights. Where education was inaccessible or limited to primary school, it presented as a challenge in achieving well-being and ending poverty. Cooperation as a thematic challenge manifested as lack of collaboration between governments and civil society; lack of multilateral cooperation; non-inclusive policy making; insufficient support for community-based or multi-disciplinary/cross-sector initiatives; prioritization of short-term gains over long-term sustainability; and global disunity.

Questions we continue to ask

These challenges to human wellbeing lead NGOs to ask:

1. How do we better unite to break down the barriers to inclusion, cross-sector collaboration, and multilateral cooperation?
2. Whose voices are we still not hearing?
3. How can we better ensure that all people are reflected in the data that determines actions?
4. How can those voices be brought into decision making and their hands into implementation?

Recommendations

If a central barrier to progress in reducing poverty and strengthening human well-being is lack of inclusion, then it follows that the calls to action hinge upon putting in place the systems and policies that will allow people to raise their voices and leverage their inherent strengths and contextual knowledge. Therefore, NGOs commit to and invite the UN System and Member States to:

1. Ensure human rights for all, including for a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; and eliminate all forms of discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance; eliminate discriminatory laws, policies, and practices; and promote appropriate policies, legislation and action in this regard.
2. Recognize the work being done at local levels and ensure opportunities for local communities and marginalized persons to identify their own needs and priorities, participate in decision-making, planning, implementation and monitoring of actions toward the SDGs.

Make available and disaggregate data that can be used by stakeholders to inform decision making and enhance programming.

3. In educational policies and competencies, acknowledge formal and non-formal means of learning throughout the lifespan, ensure national financing and structures for adult education including upskilling and re-skilling, and support education for sustainable development and global citizenship.
4. Partner with science and academia in seeking sustainable solutions, and at the same consider the indigenous wisdom present in communities.
5. Integrate long-term, locally driven development that strengthens resilience in short-term responses to the crises that face humanity.
6. Improve mechanisms for sharing information across sectors and connecting resources across sectors; and increase funding to projects and initiatives that impact multiple SDGs through a cross-sector approach;
7. Ensure transparency and access to information and data;
8. Meet the financial commitments promised for the adequate funding of sustainable development, and prioritize long-term human and environmental well-being and sustainable recovery from the pandemic over debt repayment;

9. Continue in and complete the work of identifying the synergies and interlinkages across the agendas (Agenda 2030, Paris Agreement, Beijing Platform, Safe Schools Declaration, Sendai Framework, Global Compact for Migration, etc) and systematically address them when making decisions or setting policies;
10. Unite in strengthening the well-being of all peoples.

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Section 2

Responding to the Economic Shock of COVID 19, Relaunching Growth, Sharing Economic Benefits and Addressing Developing Countries' Financing Challenges

In 2020, the world is facing previously unimaginable challenges, due to the sudden and devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts are still not fully understood but beyond the immediate healthcare emergency, the long-term consequences of this crisis have left governments and institutions in a state of fundamental reevaluation of the very basis of their economic models.

However, the pandemic is not an equalizer; in fact, it has thrown into sharp contrast the underlying inequalities and fragility of current economic models and has hit those furthest behind the hardest. In effect, the global response to the pandemic must be a renewed commitment to leave no one behind. We call on the UN and Member State governments to lead a multilateral process to ensure sufficient funds are available through the WHO and national governments to ensure the provision of free universal healthcare, social care and support to those who are directly affected in all parts of the world. This must be done equally regardless of individuals' legal status, age, gender, disability or identity, without fear of deportation or detention, criminalization, exploitation or abuse. In addition, this process must be transparent, inclusive, equitable and accountable.

Furthermore, there are deeper questions to be addressed regarding economic models of the last 40 years. While there has been progress in lifting many people out of absolute poverty, levels of inequality for the vast majority of global populations have steadily risen. A number of recent studies have highlighted how inequality undermines development, reduces opportunity, and slows innovation. Economic power has become ever more concentrated in fewer hands and the benefits of technological advances have been unfairly distributed. Furthermore, the natural world has continued to be exploited while humanity continues in a pattern of growth at any social or environmental cost, failing to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation.

The world has reached a significant turning point. There is now a recognized need to move towards a different way of quantifying success and healthy societies that encompasses social and environmental well-being. There is a crucial window of opportunity to re-think our approach and consider a model which emphasizes resilience and longer-term planning to ensure a healthier future for humanity and a flourishing planet.

This re-thinking will require a process that engages all members of the community in planning and implementation processes; respecting cultural, social and environmental norms and practices; finding ways of living in harmony with nature; supporting nature-based solutions; ensuring all development is nature-sensitive with environmental and social safeguards.

Alternative models have been observed to demonstrate feasible and more sustainable drivers of the future economy. Approaches built on low carbon short value chains enable localization of the economy, which will lead to climate and employment benefits. At the same time, the solidarity economy model enables a human-rights-based approach that breaks with over-production and consumption, loss and waste and financialization/commodification of resources. Much of this is applicable to many other sectors of the economy to ensure that the wider social and environmental impacts are included in a longer-term planning cycle.

Small-scale, locally based funding to conserve biodiversity has been seen by NGOs to promote wider prosperity for people and the planet. One specific example is directing funds towards a project for

restoring mangrove trees in East Africa. The sustainable use of the leaves, wood, and roots of the mangrove tree can provide a number of benefits for local people and create habitats for other species. For instance, the leaves can be harvested for their medicinal properties, the flowers can be used to support honeybees, while the ecosystem around the mangroves provides an ideal habitat for collection of cockles at low tide in the mud or on sandbanks, oyster, and clam gathering, shrimping, fishponds and fish culture. Within models of an environmental and solidarity economy there are complementary roles for government and civil society to play in transitioning to a fully sustainable world.

Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action

In order to support transformative pathways and accelerated action, there are a number of key steps that governments and multilateral groups can take. These include debt cancellation for low- and middle-income countries, financial burden relief mechanisms and large-scale aid investments to fund universal public healthcare and social service delivery.

We must support those in a fragile economic position by establishing a global recovery fund and delivering full implementation of universal social protection benefits and safety nets in all countries, including establishing and supporting social protection floors.

Economic stimulus plans must ensure that the economy of the future is sustainable and just, moving subsidies away from fossil fuel industries and using stimulus packages to create millions of sustainable 21st Century jobs. The UNSG and others need to unite in committing to “building back better” and building back with clean, nature-sensitive renewable energy and green economies incorporating nature-based solutions.

Significant challenges remain which pose major barriers to transformative change

There is the critical issue of political will and commitment to deliver the transformative agenda of the SDGs. A number of countries seem less willing to take up this transition due to their own election priorities and the support that they may receive from major investors, e.g. in fossil fuel industries. COVID-19 has put further pressure on many governments who are increasingly aware of the need to balance economic, social and environmental priorities.

In many countries corruption and tax evasion pose major challenges. It is crucial that major corporations are appropriately taxed in the country of their countries of operations and that systemic corruption is tackled through an independent judiciary.

At the same time, there are structural inequalities, whereby the development process is often captured by elite or corporate interests, or other authorities who often do not take into consideration the aims of the SDGs or the needs of the people. Additionally, cultural or discriminatory barriers sometimes lead to inequities in the distribution of funds or prioritization of projects.

Finally, there are growing challenges around the lack of economic opportunities following the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a real risk that financial resources are being redirected away from activities essential to the most marginalized in society. At the start of the decade of action, it is more important than ever to ensure direct support for community-led activity for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Questions we continue to ask

Can technology promote the development of more equal societies rather than further the concentration of wealth?

During the pandemic, many people have come to rely more heavily than ever on technology to enable remote working and to practice physical distancing. With uneven access to critical technologies and the infrastructures to support them, there is a real risk that the benefits of technology will not reach those left behind and could further exacerbate inequalities.

How can governments, international financial institutions and private investors move towards a more consultative approach?

There are good examples of governments which are open to dialogue on their socio-economic plans. This is now the key moment for wider community dialogues and citizen assemblies to help to define a just recovery. Governments, international financial institutions and private investors must seek wide stakeholder inputs and evaluate plans informed by community priorities.

Recommendations

As all countries tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and governments begin to plan ahead for the steps forward, it is essential that governments commit to a just recovery so that we can collectively emerge from this crisis to build a better world. To both recovery from the economic strains brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as continue toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, we must aim to:

1. Promote universal healthcare — especially full funding of vaccination programs and women's sexual reproductive healthcare — welfare payments, and social protection that is rights-based and universally applied;
2. Re-examine and, where feasible, cancel or postpone national debts to ensure sufficient finance is available to governments to ensure a just recovery;
3. Promote a global ceasefire and pressure governments to redirect military spending towards social protection;
4. Adopt progressive and redistributive taxation policies, alongside measures to remove harmful subsidies, and tackle corruption, tax evasion and illicit financial flows;
5. Ensure long-term financial support for critical infrastructure education, wider training and skills;

Incentivize nature-sensitive clean energy, green industries, and a rapid scaling up of sustainable jobs;

6. Involve civil society organizations in economic policy and operational planning;
7. Ensure a holistic approach with clear social and environmental conditions on any emergency financial stimulus to companies, such as treating workers fairly, protecting biodiversity and cutting carbon emissions to enable a shift to a more localized, just, resilient and environmentally balanced economy.

With uneven access to critical technologies and the infrastructures to support them, there is a real risk that the benefits of technology will not reach those left behind and could further exacerbate inequalities

Section 3

Building Sustainable Food Systems and Healthy Nutrition Patterns: Ending Hunger and Achieving Food Security for All

Transformative and accelerated action toward sustainable food systems must be rooted in locally relevant solutions, with a significant focus on capacity building. Funding for quality, and equal education around sustainable food systems, political and economic will are necessary to support awareness-raising and the development of infrastructure, recognizing that many rural communities are being left behind. This is particularly clear when considering the impact of climate change and related disasters on food-producing areas. Harnessing the skills and experience of stakeholders, in line with the 2030 Agenda's requirement of "robust participation of the peoples of the world", and ensuring local, regional, and cross-sectoral collaboration will also accelerate the impact on global food systems. This is relevant in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic which likely sprung from the unsustainable and unregulated trade and consumption of wildlife^{1 2 3}, yet which has seen communities rely on low-carbon, short value chains and local partnerships to keep communities functioning.

Significant challenges remain which pose major barriers to transformative change

It is important to recognize that rural family farming is responsible for 80% of world's food production and provides a host of economic opportunities. However, economic structures such as harmful subsidies create an unfair playing field in agricultural systems, marginalizing workers, environmental and animal welfare concerns. Traditional ways of measuring development direct agricultural development towards industrialized systems which perpetuate inequities, rather than incentivizing investment in sustainable, equitable and humane agricultural development. Investment is needed to develop better alternatives to current processes. Political will and policy structures are also hurdles to improving food systems and obstacles to food sovereignty. In many countries, large corporations have undue influence over the policies affecting food systems, leaving consumers, smallholders, and workers behind. Policy frameworks in many countries favor the development of industrialized agriculture infrastructure, putting the economic interests of a select few above the economic and environmental wellbeing of the majority. Poor multilateral cooperation; lack of representation of consumers, smallholders, and workers in food policy development; inhibited technological progress; lack of solutions for food waste; and local government involvement are also key challenges.

Lack of awareness as well as barriers to food system education create limitations to achieving a sustainable food system. Consumers need information to make healthy and sustainable food choices, and they need meaningful product labelling which makes good decision making possible. Training and education on best practices are also needed at all levels and stages of production to support the transition to more equitable, sustainable and humane systems.

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1. The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2. *Nature*. www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-0820-9
 2. COVID-19: The Wildlife Trade and Human Disease. *Scientific American*. www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/COVID-19-the-wildlife-trade-and-human-disease/
 3. Scientists track the link between wildlife and COVID-19. *University of Southern California News*. www.news.usc.edu/168960/wildlife-COVID-19-pandemic-usc-scientists-animal-trafficking/

Lastly, food systems cannot continue on the current trajectory: there are not enough resources. Industrial agriculture, particularly for livestock, is recognized as a key driver of climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss and pollution. Small-scale farmers are often forced off their lands and into city slums to survive. And at the same time, increasing environmental degradation further reduces agricultural productivity and food security.

Questions we continue to ask

As the world aims to end hunger, improve food systems, and ensure food security for all while respecting the environment, NGOs find themselves still facing these questions:

1. How can we introduce genuine systemic change to the current system that is creating the issues our planet and human society around the world are facing?
2. How do these transformative models guarantee and uphold human rights and ensure genuine social inclusion of all?
3. With the need to restart economies in light of COVID-19, how do we ensure that small island states and those most likely to be left behind are not ignored, without a focus on disaggregated data and civil society access to governmental and international processes?
4. In light of COVID-19, how can a One Health/One Welfare approach be mainstreamed, ensuring that food systems account for linkages between environmental, animal and human health and wellbeing?

Recommendations

To achieve the sustainable food systems for needed to end hunger and to ensure the health of the biosphere, we need to:

1. Establish economic incentives and disincentives that drive production and consumption towards more sustainable, equitable and humane products; and remove harmful subsidies and taxes on unsustainable and unhealthy foods, such as meat, processed food and food high in sugar and saturated fats.
2. Strengthen protections and regulations for workers, migrant workers, smallholders, the environment and animal welfare.
3. Secure land tenure for agriculture and housing of those supporting agriculture.
4. Disaggregate data and share such data in order to establish the reality of the problem and shape effective policies.
5. Ensure participation of all stakeholders in policy development to ensure that agricultural development supports and improves the wellbeing of those furthest behind.
6. Support and expand education and awareness-raising to empower consumers to make healthy, sustainable and humane food choices, to reduce food waste and the global climate and environmental footprint of agriculture.
7. Increase training and capacity building to implement best practices to improve animal welfare and sustainability, and also to increase the competitiveness of smallholders.
8. Learn from local wisdom, local practices, and indigenous knowledge.

Section 4

Achieving Energy Decarbonization and Universal Access to Energy

NGOs play a pivotal role in building partnerships, educating local communities, and influencing sustainable responsive policies that impact the inherent linkages between energy access and the wellbeing of both people and the planet. For example, in one study looking at the Social Return on Investment (SROI) in households receiving basic energy access in remote rural Uganda, there appears to be a 40x SROI when health, safety and productive benefits are taken into account. For rural and remote populations, the shift to clean and renewable energy has also created livelihoods, while the decentralization of renewable energy solutions (for example, through microgrids) are playing a much larger role in providing resilience, energy security and reducing disaster risk at grass root levels.

Working across silos with a variety of stakeholders is increasingly necessary to create cross-sectoral and transformative pathways. The NGO Major Group's collective knowledge and strength hold the key to accelerated action on achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to sustainable energy, as together we work to achieve Agenda 2030 in a changed global landscape.

Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action

The characteristics of transformative and accelerated action toward sustainable energy include a focus on interlinkages and a demand for increased funding for cross-sectoral coordinated action. One example of a transformative pathway for policy makers is the Water, Energy, Food and Climate nexus, which recognizes the interconnectedness of Agenda 2030 and can act as a framing mechanism for strategic action. Increasing renewable energy access in low-resource communities is a proven transformative pathway which accelerates action on Agenda 2030.

An example of the intersection between improving access to energy while preserving vital ecosystems and species is seen in the work of the multi-stakeholder Convention on Migratory Species Energy Task Force. Coordinated by BirdLife International, the Energy Task Force works with governments, international financial institutions, industry, academia and NGOs to reconcile renewable energy developments with conservation of migratory species, develop strong environmental standards and safeguards, and to support the use of associated guidance and tools. This illustrates that when diverse stakeholders work together, there need not be 'tradeoffs' between access to energy and the wellbeing of the planet.

Challenges

Due to a lack of equity in energy access, hundreds of millions of people are being left behind and out of critical conversations shaping our changing world. While many in the industrialized North pivot to online work, political engagement and social interactions, the internet is a blank screen for those living without electricity. Without reliable energy access, frontline healthcare workers cannot treat patients, communicate supply needs, and participate in data collection and disease mitigation strategies. NGO partners in low-resource, off-grid communities cannot join online working groups, coordinate programming, involve staff in safety training or access health resources necessary to combat and, indeed, survive the crisis.

Challenges to developing transformative SDG7 pathways and accelerating action are grounded in economics, stakeholder engagement and policy decisions. As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates,

we cannot address major issues without buy-in from all sectors and communities. Immediate funding, for instance, is needed to electrify off-grid clinics in sub-Saharan Africa, where approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of all clinics lack electrification. In the future, sustainable sources of electricity for such facilities may be developed from emerging technologies.

Questions we continue to ask

The questions that continue to be unresolved in the aim to achieve energy decarbonization include:

1. What are the quantifiable cost-benefits to health, safety, education, women's empowerment, productive use, biodiversity and the environment when sustainable energy is available?
2. How can policy makers leverage financing and social safety net mechanisms to reach the 580 million people living without electricity and the 3.1 billion people using biomass and inefficient cookstoves?
3. How can we leverage renewable energy systems to address concerns for planetary boundaries, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation and conserve the water needed in energy production?

Recommendations

In this climate of emergency response, we must prioritize renewable energy programming in governmental responses as we build transformative pathways and accelerate action. Therefore, we call on all stakeholders to:

1. Increase cross-sectoral interventions to implement clean energy programming to benefit the greatest number of communities without harming our shared ecosystem;
2. Include in stimulus packages and aid interventions funding only for sustainable projects that incorporate clean, renewable energy;
3. Minimize fossil fuel subsidies until they can be eliminated and incentivize renewables;
4. Provide environmental and social safeguards to ensure the urgently needed renewable energy transition supports rather than exacerbates biodiversity conservation and nature-based solutions;
5. Increase healthcare funding to provide clean energy for hospitals and clinics;
6. Ensure access to affordable, efficient energy for homes, schools, businesses and public spaces.

As governments commit to massive financial investments to fight COVID-19, we have a unique global opportunity to shift from unsustainable energy to clean, environmentally sustainable solutions across all of our sectors.

Section 5

Promoting Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Development and Bolstering Local Action to Accelerate Implementation

Action at the local level has the potential to have a direct and transformative effect on progress towards the SDGs in terms of the way people live and work by engaging all stakeholders meaningfully, drawing on their strengths, resources and expertise, and respecting the rights and interests of all. Key areas where local solutions can make a difference are in sustainable urbanization and rural development, climate action, and a whole range of social and economic outcomes, across the SDGs. However, the failure to act or continuing to prioritize profit or short-term growth, can be costly, leading to overcrowded and polluted cities, contributing to climate change, and leaving rural areas behind.

Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action

As evidenced in the work of NGOs, transformative, accelerated actions to ensure sustainable urban and peri-urban development can be characterized by the following:

1. A rights-based approach: In the context of urban and peri-urban development, this applies particularly to questions around land and housing, and access to public services, such as healthcare, education, water and sanitation, public spaces, and facilities such as libraries.
2. A unified approach, taking account of the interaction between urban and rural, and between nature and society, as characterized by initiatives like eco-villages, or community-supported agriculture.
3. Enhanced participation of civil society organizations (CSOs), drawing on their expertise and experience to help truly localize the SDGs. This participation needs to be supported, both through laws and funding.
4. Effective use of existing assets and institutions: more needs to be done to regenerate existing neighborhoods, or engage institutions such as libraries, rather than simply create new buildings and centres.
5. Incorporating culture and tradition into policymaking: applying culture and tradition to the work of policymaking can unlock possibilities and ensure greater public buy-in.
6. An informed and engaged community, involved in policy planning and implementation, for example through education for sustainable development.
7. Effective institutions at all levels: national governments should support effective coordination mechanisms and empower regional and local entities to integrate the SDGs into their own action. All institutions need to be effectively and transparently governed.
8. Effective use of data and evidence: new technological tools can help, but should be used wisely, and with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Data needs to be disaggregated in a way that allows the needs of vulnerable groups to be addressed, as well as to allow for tailored local approaches.

The Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have made a positive step in improving civil society participation in sustainable development.

Challenges to Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Development

One of the potential strengths of delivering development at the local level is the possibility to bring together actors more effectively to create sustainable solutions. However, this is not always the case. Too often governments at all levels have not moved their plans for the goals into action. There is also often a lack of coordination across government, leading to cross-cutting drivers of development such as culture being forgotten or even harmed.

More long-term thinking and planning is needed, including support to scale-up successful pilot projects. Impacts on rural areas, on the environment, and on the long-term need to be taken into account through a more unified approach to urbanization policy. This often stems from insufficient use of data and research. Similarly, many governments do not offer stable, meaningful ways for civil society organizations (CSOs) to engage. Potential partners - NGOs, libraries, people with experience - are not engaged. In parallel, civil society organizations themselves need to be ready to cooperate. Finally, too little consideration is given to engaging citizens meaningfully. Creating sustainable cities and communities depends to a major extent on changing behaviors. When citizens are not informed, or effort is not made to engage them, they cannot be expected to buy-in to initiatives.

Questions we continue to ask

The gaps in improving and empowering localized action as well as sustainable urban and peri-urban development must be addressed through the continued search to the answers to the following questions:

1. How effectively are those taking decisions basing these on full information and consideration of social, environmental and economic dimensions of development, as well as of available assets?
2. Are there structures and institutions at all levels with the resources, powers and attitudes necessary to enable local action?
3. To what extent are decision-makers focusing on engaging, informing and empowering individuals as a key tool for accelerating development?

Recommendations

If we are to harness the strength of local action, bring about a more inclusive process of achieving Agenda 2030, and achieve the sustainable urban and peri-urban development needed to mitigate the impacts of climate change, we all must commit to:

1. Take action at the local level, recognizing and making use of local characteristics, assets and culture;
2. Involve people and consider the environment in all stages of urban and peri-urban development;
3. Plan for resiliency by employing tools such as risk-informed development and hazard measurement;
4. Draw on disaggregated and relevant data;
5. Promote an informed and engaged citizenry through transparency.

Sustainable urban and peri-urban development benefits strongly from civil society engagement. For this to happen, there need to be the right institutions and right attitudes towards engaging civil society and the wider population at all levels.

Section 6

Securing the Global Environmental Commons

In recent years, we have become increasingly aware of the need for and benefits from protecting and restoring our global environmental commons. Nature-based solutions are now seen as being essential for increasing food production; reducing poverty; providing access to clean water, basic sanitation, energy, and the natural resources needed for sustainable consumption and production; and to restore the Earth.

Humanity must develop much more of a sense of unity while striving to live in harmony with nature; create an inclusive and fair society and support a healthy economy — all of which are fundamental to achieving the SDGs. COVID-19 also demonstrates how society's current use and management of natural ecosystems and animals, especially wildlife, can have severe negative repercussions for human health and wellbeing, along with the global economy. It is imperative that we recognize the intrinsic value of nature, including wildlife, habitats and land, and take into account how scientific knowledge and understanding can and should transform our values and approach to protecting the environmental commons.

It is essential that we stem environmental degradation and transition to regenerative agriculture and sustainable fisheries as rapidly as possible, while addressing interconnectedness and recognizing the central role of water as a catalyst for action and progress across all SDGs.

Nature-based solutions - the conservation and restoration of carbon-dense natural ecosystems - can provide over 30% of the climate mitigation action needed by 2030, as well as supporting climate change adaptation and disaster risk resilience. Intact, biodiverse ecosystems, such as forests, wetlands, grasslands and oceans, are particularly efficient and cost-effective nature-based solutions, as they sequester and store significantly more carbon when compared to monoculture tree plantations, agriculture and grazed lands, in addition to conserving biodiversity and providing a range of other ecosystem services. They are also more resilient, functional and able to adapt to a warming climate. Other examples of the transformative pathway that stems from securing the environmental commons can be seen in the One Welfare approach, which recognizes the interconnections between the well-being of humans, animals, and in ecovillages (see also section 1.) and similar ecologically sustainable communities where the aim is to make use of a harmonious connection between environment, animal and human life.

Education for our global commons and thus sustainable development is also essential in order to adequately address our most urgent challenges and meet the SDGs. Hands-on learning is key for understanding new concepts and embedding habits for sustainable living.

The international community can and must scale up ambition by focusing on such things as transitioning to a circular economy, net-zero GHG emissions, 100% renewable energy, limiting economic growth, reducing environmental impacts, and investing in community resilience.

Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action

Direct observation of natural growth can teach us how to solve many of our own problems. For example, we can look at how nature typically steers a system to thrive and yet be flexible, adapting over time, thus avoiding a coming catastrophe and general collapse.

Finance solutions for biodiversity can promote peace and prosperity and provide the means to unlock multiple sources of financial benefits that can come from nature-based solutions such as protecting and restoring degraded ecosystems, for example mangroves, rivers, forests, wetlands, and coasts among other vulnerable ecosystems.

Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) has shown effectiveness as another way to secure the global environmental commons. In this model, cooperatives and worker ownership, community services, ethical banks and local currencies create a more just and sustainable economic system. SSE focuses on a circular economy of production and consumption, and views growth from a perspective of human and ecosystem wellbeing.

The role that civil society can play in implementation processes has been greatly undervalued. Unfortunately, our governments and international institutions seem to be much better at funding pilot programs than in carrying out the essential strategies for scaling up and shifting whole regions, or supporting the adoption of best practices and transformative initiatives.

Challenges

NGOs experienced the greatest barriers to bringing about the fruition of a sustainable global commons in two key areas: a lack of political will; and a failure to support many of the most promising means of financing such as land value taxation, subsidy reform, ODA increases, new and innovative means of taxation including currency transaction fees, carbon taxes and/or other such climate financing schemes, among other financing innovations. Furthermore, it is impossible to “decouple” the economy from environmental impacts. Neither growth of GDP nor its systemic impacts have slowed since global data on this became available 45 years ago.

Questions we continue to ask

Even with the progress being made to secure the global environmental commons, we still need to answer these questions:

1. What are the prerequisites that need to be taken in order to transition as rapidly as possible to full sustainability?
2. How can we raise public and political awareness of the value of biodiversity, and ensure that this value is adequately incorporated into policies, economies and practice on the ground, to adequately address the drivers of biodiversity loss and support nature-based solutions?
3. How can we balance the wellbeing of the global environmental commons with the needs of populations that depend upon the informal economy in Africa and other Least Developed Countries, particularly in those communities that rely on biodiversity and self-sufficient agriculture?
4. How can we encourage and promote cruelty free products and animal husbandry?
5. What can we do to help ensure that animal sentience is recognized and considered in the intersection between human and environmental issues?
6. How can we ensure synergies between the nature, climate, oceans and sustainable development agenda in this ‘super year’ for all four, and to get real commitment to action on this at UNGA75 and the UN Summit on Biodiversity to be held as part of UNGA?

Recommendations

Securing the environmental commons require the international community to:

1. Support the outcomes from this year's conference on the Convention on Biological Diversity along with the goals and strategy of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and the efforts to strengthen and implement national and international environmental legislation and law including through nature-based solutions and a nature-sensitive transition to renewable energy; and commit to fulfilling these agreements as rapidly as possible;
2. Take action to stem climate change; build bridges and create awareness about the inter-linkages among sustainable development, climate action, and disaster risk reduction;
3. Fully incorporate Education for Sustainable Development into national curricula.
4. Fund and support ecologically sustainable communities and the design, planning and implementation for sustainable communities in collaboration with civil society;
5. Assess the potential for redirecting economic growth onto a natural path modelled after nature's systems, for a healthy and enduring trajectory of sustainable development;
6. Adopt sustainable development as a fundamental operating principle of governance and central in government decision making;
7. Meet the existing commitments to develop local and national plans for sustainable consumption and production, to restore ecosystems, to protect and sustain biodiversity, to eradicate poverty, and to do these things in a fully integrative manner, both vertically and horizontally, ideally in one holistic and cohesive national and global sustainable development strategy and plan;
8. Designate within each country a federal office or agency with the responsibility to oversee and coordinate that country's sustainable development programs and initiatives;
9. Mandate federal, state, and local budgetary processes to ensure that government funding fully supports efforts to transition to full sustainable development;
10. Develop the means for climate-proofing water management tools and approaches; recognize water's value as part of social, environmental and economic prosperity; and adopt a human rights-based approach to water that ensures women, children and youth, indigenous populations and other vulnerable groups are empowered to take action and become rights holders as well as duty bearers;
11. Recognize and support community-based approaches that provide multiple benefits across sectors, and foster partnerships between civil society and government.

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Section 7

Financing for Transformative Pathways and Accelerated Action

NGOs and civil society are increasingly recognized as valuable partners in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, NGOs still find that their work and the conditions that are needed for achieving the goals are severely impeded by international and national funding criteria and practices.

In some instances, funding may be controlled by corporations or high-power special interest groups with a mindset of short-term gains or mismatched expectations of return on their investments. Additionally, funding is often earmarked for a single sector or toward the achievement of just one particular SDG, when accomplishment depends on cross-sector collaboration. These practices sometimes find their way into the national funding, where corruption and fund reallocation to projects that create political gain or favor can be observed.

At the local level, smaller scale yet effective actions and programs may be left out of funding-streams because:

1. a lack of past histories of grant management,
2. as a result of not knowing the ways to access funds, or
3. as a result of taking a more integrative or holistic (less siloed) and long-term approach to problem solving that does not meet the grant requirements.

In a risk-averse climate, these situations sometimes result in the work of grassroots organizations either being overlooked or swallowed up under the auspices of larger, more well-known organizations; while the latter umbrella approach only supports the development and success of local programs temporarily. Unless conducted in a spirit of capacity building, in the long term this practice compounds the lack of training for higher level management skills, aggravates the absence of management histories and expertise of small or grassroots organizations, and sends a message that only “developed” world organizations can manage funds.

Recommendations

As the way we both perceive and work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals shifts from a narrowly siloed perspective to more multidisciplinary and holistic pathways, funding must follow the same direction. This will require funding through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals as well as the Paris Agreement, and calls for unified efforts of private sector, Member States, multilateral financial institutions and the UN system in taking the following actions:

1. Put in place meaningful and effective anti-corruption mechanisms;
2. Incentivize funding for long-term high impact programs toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, while allowing for multi-sector collaborations that enhance transformative pathways;
3. Eliminate subsidies to industries whose operations contribute to or worsen the impacts of climate change or put people, ecosystems, animals or the planet at risk;

4. Improve access to grants for small, local programs, initiatives and organizations by providing or enhancing financial literacy, teaching grant management, and providing monitoring and evaluation tools, rather than requiring proven success; and increase awareness of existing financial support mechanisms;
5. Improve access to affordable, low-cost financing under favorable terms for projects and programs that are in alignment with a green economy and/or the SDGs;
6. Strengthen and make space for the meaningful participation of local communities at all phases of funding from determination of needs and fund allocation, to monitoring and evaluation;
7. Increase oversight of funds granted to and managed by governments, and where mismanagement exists, redirect funds to high-impact programs or projects conducted by civil society organizations at local or regional levels;
8. Implement public financing instruments that maximize efficiency and effectiveness, while also catalyzing private capital, such as revolving funds and credit enhancement schemes;
9. Build social protection floors that create the basic stability required to achieve the SDGs;
10. Fulfil ODA commitments and keep ODA funds separate from national security and military or security public expenditures.

As shown through the united efforts in the recent Forum on Financing to create a Programme of Action ⁴ to fight the COVID 19 pandemic, we can work together to ensure adequate, just, responsive, and responsible funding to achieve the SDGs.

⁴ Fifth ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development.
<https://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffdforum/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/04/First-Draft-2020-FfD-Forum-Outcome.pdf>

Section 8

Progress and Challenges as We Strive to Leave No One Behind

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was not on track for achieving most of the 169 Sustainable Development Goal targets. Consequently, when COVID-19 arrived, it further exposed the pre-existing inequalities in a shared world. Women and girls, children and youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants and refugees, indigenous people, racial, ethnic or religious minorities, LGBTQI, and the poor already faced challenges and vulnerabilities that kept them from full realization of the goals of sustainable development and made them more vulnerable to the risks and impacts of climate change. The COVID-19 crisis has brought to the forefront the need for accelerated and united action from all stakeholders with each actor playing its own role, in different ways, to leave no one behind in bringing about a sustainable world for all.

As demonstrated by the examples given by members of the NGO Major Group, at the core of this united action must be the conviction that if people, especially the most marginalized and the voiceless, are not treated as rights-holders, including being given the information and skills they need in order to be able to make the best possible decisions for themselves, policies and measures will largely fail and will not bring about sustainable progress. The goals of local, national, regional or international governments as well as civil society, private organizations, businesses, academia or those in scientific fields, must be formed in collaboration with the people affected by their programs and policies. Central to the goals should be awareness and transparency about how proposed actions affect humanity as well as our planet, its ecosystems and biodiversity.

However, prior to the pandemic the aim to leave no one behind faced challenges that now have been even further exasperated by COVID-19. Although all Member States have human rights obligations under international law, ensuring the compliance with these obligations while implementing the 2030 Agenda largely remains aspirational. Gender equality (SDG 5) for example, while appearing in the rhetoric of policy, has not yet been woven into the social fabric of all communities. Additionally, we continue to witness “the growth of racism and the continuous disrespect for indigenous populations rights; while the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex community (LGBTQI) also continues to suffer harassment, violence and overall discrimination” (Gestos).

There also continues to be gaps in participatory democracy, that includes decision-making at local levels, including budget allocations, and is supported by education/awareness and information and transparency. Consequently, bidirectional mistrust between peoples and governments thickens the barriers that leave individuals and communities behind.

Despite the disruption caused by the pandemic, many governments are still operating under a business as usual model, supporting the private sector and the strong market approach rather than goals of inclusion and a fully circular economy. Among other obstacles that we still face in leaving no one behind is the lack of political will, oversight, accountability, transparency, co-operation and participation as well as institutional barriers including that of siloed work. Additional challenges include the availability of limited financing. Moreover, issues around debt, financial instability, austerity policies, and private sector involvement in the provision of social services need further study and action in the SDG context.

It is also crucial that issues related to financing generally do not serve to limit civil society participation and that participative and democratic budgeting is promoted, with the maximum available resources dedicated to those who have been left the farthest behind including inhabitants of our planet who do not have a voice but are part of the biodiversity and ecosystems on our planet.

Leaving no one behind requires empowering people through inclusion. Yet while this has been described as being the secret for achieving SDGs, this is also a task to which sufficient attention has not been given. Local practices have the potential to become new norms that build sustainable practices into the culture and from the ground up. However, political backlash and push back by governments has led to shrinking the space for civil society across the globe.

Recommendations

People want and have a right to determine their own futures. Therefore, we call on all stakeholders to commit to the following actions:

1. Develop plans, solutions, and actions that place the expressed needs of a community or population at the center of all goals and then allow actions to revolve around both immediate concerns and long-term resilience and sustainability, while inviting and including all of their people to participate actively in such processes.
2. Foster input, participation and leadership from the people who have been left out of systems that ensure well-being and opportunities to demonstrate capacity.
3. Be willing to be self-critical and listen to dissenting voices; protect the freedom of civil society to articulate honestly the state of nations.
4. Include a diverse civil society at the decision-making level and respect differing perspectives.
5. Take an honest look at the model of development that we are currently following that continues to increase inequality in such alarming proportions, examine the current practices of financing that are increasing inequities, eliminate inequitable taxation schemes that favor the wealthiest out of fear of de-incentivizing multinational corporations, control illicit financial flows, and develop financial mechanisms that reduce inequalities.
6. In all short-term responses, integrate long-term, *locally* driven systems that strengthen resiliency.
7. Transfer the work of development into the hands of local community members, and if or where skill needs to be strengthened in order to do that work, do not supplant local providers but rather support their ability to serve, valuing and empowering local capacity, wisdom, culture and contextualizing/localizing action.

Questions we continue to ask

In a world where inequalities are on the rise, paying special attention to the most vulnerable groups is a question of human rights and social justice. To address entrenched inequities, we must look into the systemic obstacles that prevent them from participating fully in the economic, social, cultural, and political life of their country.

It follows, then that we should ask ourselves:

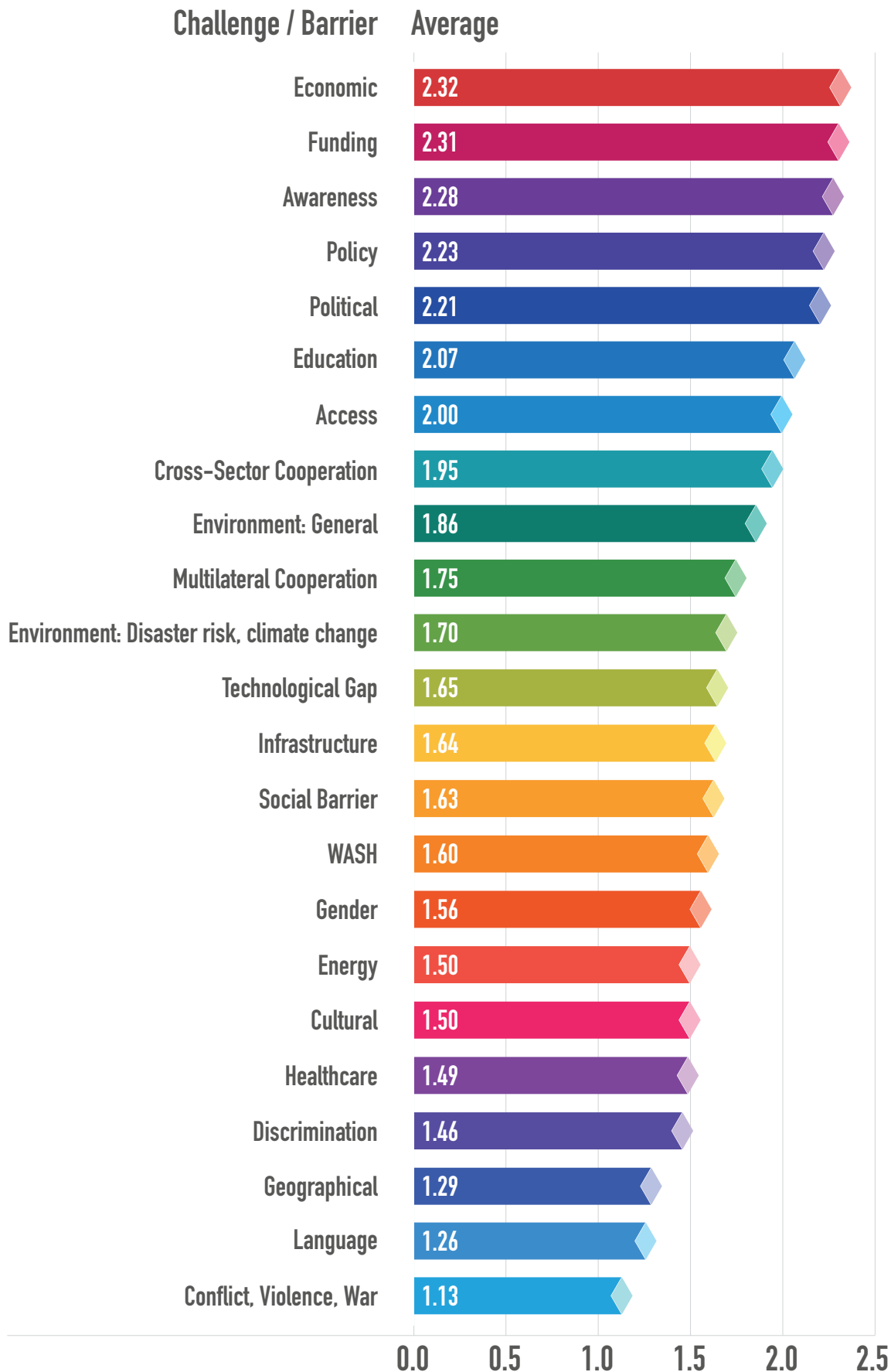
1. Are we empowering people; recognizing their strengths, value and contributions; and strengthening the skills that give them the capacity to achieve the sustainable development goals? Do solutions enable people to have a sense of belonging and being valued in the community, as well as create connectedness across class, race, ethnicity, social identities and other divides?
2. Are all stakeholders involved in the design of the action? Whose voices are we missing? How can we bring those voices into the decision making?
3. How can we improve collaboration?
4. How can we better ensure that data reflects the experiences of all people, especially those living in remote areas or from marginalized populations?
5. Are we really listening to and understanding the needs of the community and are the programs actually meeting those needs?
6. Do these solutions reduce and eliminate barriers that interfere with people earning a decent living and caring for their family members?
7. What can we do to help ensure that animal sentience is recognized and considered in the intersection between human and environmental issues?
8. How can we ensure synergies between the nature, climate, oceans and sustainable development agenda in this 'super year' for all four, and to get real commitment to action on this at UNGA75 and the UN Summit on Biodiversity to be held as part of UNGA?

Humanity is facing a unique opportunity in its history: an opportunity to unite.

We must learn from the pandemic the lessons of collaboration and all-citizen, all-person action that we have needed to face this crisis together. Let us not squander our opportunity to shine a light on our collective power and the strength of our voices rising together and across silos to achieve the SDGs.

Appendix 1

Challenges and Barriers to transformative pathways:
Results of a survey of challenges to the SDGs as experienced by NGO Major Group members, 2020



Signatories

The Major Group of Non-Governmental Organizations
Signatories to the 2020 Position Paper

Amis des Etrangers au Togo

Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW)

Better World Cameroon, Bafut Ecovillage

Centre for Responsible Business (CRB)

COLCOLSOS

Console Mission

ENDA Tiers Monde

Gatef Organization, Nonviolence International

Hape Development and Welfare Association Pakistan

HaritaDhara Research Development and Education Foundation

Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Loreto Generalate

Korea SDGs Network

LIDÈ Foundation

MY World Mexico

New Future Foundation Inc (NFF)

NGO Committee on Sustainable Development–NY

NGO Major Group Urban Cluster

Okogun Odigie Safewomb International Foundation (OOSAIF)

Red Internacional de Promotores ODS

Regional Centre for International Development Cooperation (RCIDC)

Revolución Sustentable ODS

Saudi Green Building Forum (SGBF)

Silambam Asia

Support for Women in Agriculture and Environment (SWAGEN)

UNESCO Etxea – UNESCO Basque Country Centre

World Silambam Association (WSA)

World Yoga Association

Youth and Women for Opportunities Uganda

The Major Group of Non-Governmental Organizations is tasked with facilitating the participation and enhancing the engagement of non-governmental organizations in the processes directly and indirectly related to the High Level Political Forum (HLPF). When possible, we work to organize positions on behalf of the members to be delivered in various United Nations spaces. Because of the diversity of voices and perspectives within this group, we are organized around thematic clusters which act as hubs of expertise on numerous issues and/or specific Sustainable Development Goals.

We are always striving towards transparency and inclusiveness in our decision-making processes. Currently we are doing this through the use of a Google Group which we hope you, Civil Society Organizations, will join.

We have three global organizing partners. We also have regional organizing partners who work to facilitate engagement in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America. Please feel free to contact any of us with proposals, questions, or concerns.

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