

Report

Learning conference on implementing the 2030 Agenda in the Asia-Pacific region, 23-24 January 2019, Shanghai, China

Introduction

The Learning Conference on implementing the 2030 Agenda in the Asia Pacific region was held from 23-24 January at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai, China. The international event was co-organized by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA- DPIDG and UNPOG), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS). In addition, the conference received the support of the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva.

This learning conference was a follow-up to the Regional Symposium on “Strengthening Capacities of Public Institutions and Developing Effective Partnerships to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” organized by UN DESA and recently held in the Republic of Korea from 24 to 26 October 2018. UNITAR and UN DESA organized similar events in 2016 in Abuja (Nigeria), Cartagena (Colombia) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). In 2016, UN DESA organized Regional Symposiums on issues related to governance and public institutions in the Bahamas and in Bolivia.

Participants

The conference was attended by more than 95 participants, including government officials leading the SDG process in their countries, diplomats, international civil servants, as well as university professors. 23 countries were represented of which many from Small Island developing states, providing different perspectives and experiences regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its implementation.

The countries that were represented, included Turkey, China, Republic of Korea, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, Marshall Islands, Russia, Armenia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Tonga, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Philippines, Nauru, Nepal, Maldives, Laos, Fiji, Bangladesh and Iran. China and Republic of Korea had a high level of representation.

Objectives and methodology

The objective of this Learning Conference was to provide a space for practical learning and the exchange of knowledge and experiences among government representatives involved in the process of integrating the SDGs in their countries' national development plans and to acquire skills needed to apply a whole of government approach to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs. It offered a platform to learn about the “best fit” mechanisms and practices to promote a “whole of government” and “whole of society” approach towards the planning, monitoring, evaluation and budgeting of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at national and international levels. The interesting aspect of the event was that it involved multiple stakeholders.

An interactive methodology was used throughout the whole event, offering participants the opportunity to share and exchange their knowledge and experiences with others. Government

representatives from the People's Republic of China, and other Asia-Pacific countries shared their experiences and practices in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs.

A special emphasis was placed on policy coherence and the important role of public institutions in promoting a holistic and inclusive implementation of the goals. The common goal was to tackle the challenges related to the implementation of the SDGs and to identify good practices.

Sessions:

The agenda of the workshop consisted of the following sessions:

Session 1 – day 1: Overview of the status implementation of the agenda in the Asia Pacific region. ESCAP provided a comprehensive factual overview of implementation of the SDGs in the different countries in the region. This was followed by a presentation from DESA DPIDG and UNPOG on what vertical and horizontal integration and the institutional arrangements to strengthen policy coherence in the implementation of the SDGs consists of.

UNPOG presented **key messages from UN DESA 2018 Symposium on Strengthening Capacities of Public Institutions and Developing Effective Partnerships to Realize the 2030 Agenda.** Bhutan, Nepal, Philippines and the Maldives presented how their countries had gone about the nationalization and the localization of the SDGs in their respective countries, with **Bhutan** highlighting the holistic approach that the government had taken, including translation of the national development plan into individual performance plans on the basis of which the civil servants would be assessed, the strengthened decentralization and fiscal empowerment and the need to address the issue of quality data and the challenge of fast track development where technological developments and innovation happened fast. Bhutan also touched upon the challenge of climate change.

The Maldives followed suit and highlighted the specific needs and characteristics of small island states: technology required to collect data (e.g., drones and crowd sourcing), the question regarding level of disaggregation of data and the requirements for reporting bearing in mind of the scale of the island. The key policy priority for the Maldives were infrastructure (interconnectedness of the islands), technology and climate change.

The Philippines expanded mainly on budget allocations for targets that were not met and the role of the private sector in beefing up budgets for unmet targets. They also referred to the role of legislative officials who champion for specific interventions through local ordinances, executive orders) and the challenges occurred on policy coherence in the case of specific goals that are interconnected like malnutrition. The presentation was followed by Q&A. The first interactive session showed a great level of interest by the participants.

Session 2 – Day 1: Mobilising public institutions for a holistic implementation of Agenda 2030: from a single interest to a shared purpose.

During the interactive exercise, the participants were divided in 8 teams from different countries and different disciplines. Each team was presented with a fictional scenario that touched upon the need for policy coherence with an emphasis on a limited number of SDGs.

DPIDG in collaboration with an expert from IBM introduced **design thinking** as a methodology/framework that aligns multi-disciplinary teams around core needs and the need to move from a single interest (sector policy) in an organization to a shared purpose (interconnected SDGs translated into national development plans). The exercise was introduced to stimulate collaboration, engage participants to think creatively and outside of the box and develop solutions faster and deliver differentiated outcomes in order to address complex and multi-layered problems. The methodology also allowed participants to experience to work outside of the sectoral silos and how to juggle competing requirements, all while facing the complexities of the implementation of the SDGs.

The participatory exercise was based on fictional scenarios and aimed at inviting participants to identify the stakeholders that would need to be involved to strengthen policy coherence at vertical and horizontal level, identify the reasons for the problems that were highlighted in the scenarios and develop strategies that were aimed at stimulating policy coherence, based on a limited number of interconnected SDGs. Finally, the different teams were asked to develop a vision on the long term on how to achieve these SDGs. After the exercise, participants were asked to share some good examples that illustrated change management in their own countries. Despite the fact that there was not enough time to implement the exercise to get a sense of its full potential to stimulate collaborative thinking in change processes in organizations, the majority of the stakeholders welcomed the exercise as they felt empowered and enthused and it had stimulated an increased sharing of experiences among the countries.

Session 3 - Day 1: Policy coherence in the Asia Pacific VNR: challenges & opportunities

Adriana Alberti presented in the following session **lessons learned, experiences and challenges** that VNR countries had come about in relation to the issue of policy coherence.

ESCAP presented the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and the series of Sub-regional Consultations, followed by presentations from VNR countries and best practice sharing from VNR countries.

Session 4 - Day 2: A whole of society approach to ensure policy coherence at the national level

During the fourth session that took place on the second day, ESCAP highlighted the importance of the whole of society approach for mainstreaming the SDGs and the need to involve different stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs. As an illustration of a **Regional mechanism for stakeholder engagement**, a video link was established with Gomer Padong, a social network “Social and Community Enterprise Focal Point- Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCM)” that presented its activities. This was followed by an interactive session on practices and challenges regarding the engagement of stakeholders at national and local level.

Session 5: Day 2 - Effective monitoring and evaluation of progress on the SDGs

This session was facilitated by UNITAR and a panel discussion between National Offices of Statistics was held between Fiji, Timor-Leste, China and Armenia. UNPOG presented an introduction about the 2018 UN SDG Report with a focus on the challenges of monitoring SDG 16. The presentations were followed by an interactive learning session on best-practice sharing on effective national Monitoring & Evaluation systems for the SDGs between Vanuatu, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

Session 6 - Day 2: Capacity building for sustainable development

The last topic of the agenda was capacity building for sustainable development. **UNITAR** gave an overview of its curriculum and training modules, followed by a presentation by DPIDG, describing the work **DPIDG** does with the **Regional Schools on Public Administration on transforming leadership and public servants’ mindsets**. **ESCAP** illustrated the **SDG help desk** that

functions as a OSS for the MS in the Asia Pacific on questions regarding the implementation of the SDGs.

A final ***interactive learning session***, addressing forward-looking interactive action planning on next steps, facilitated by DPIDG consisted of a round-table discussion on how to facilitate the effective partnership between developed and developing countries or south-south and triangular cooperation. MS presented the experiences they could offer and the needs for support with implementation they expected. The Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences presented its work on sustainable urban planning, illustrated by the “Shanghai Master Plan” and the Ministry of Interior and Safety from the Republic of Korea offered its support for implementation of the SDGs and sustainable development.