North-East Asian Multistakeholder Forum on Sustainable Development Goals

Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

5-6 September 2018
Holiday Inn, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Background of the North-East Asia Forum

The **North-East Asian Multistakeholder Forum on Sustainable Development Goals** was a part of the preparatory process for the 6th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) in 2019, which is the regional forum in support of follow up and review at the High-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) 2019. Thus, in line with the theme and focus of these Forums, the discussion in the North-East Asian Forum placed a special focus on six Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the overall theme "*Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality*". The SDGs reviewed were quality education (Goal 4), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), reduced inequalities (Goal 10), climate action (Goal 13), and peace and justice (Goal 16) as well as the means of implementation and partnership (Goal 17).

The Forum was jointly organized by ESCAP, United Nations Mongolia led by the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, and the Government of Mongolia coordinated by the National Development Agency and National Sub-Committee on SDGs.

Objectives

The main objective of the Forum was to enable an inclusive dialogue among multistakeholder groups in North-East Asia on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and to reflect subregional perspectives into the relevant regional and global processes. To achieve this, the forum aimed to:

1. Enhance awareness and understanding of the key challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in North-East Asia and the Regional Roadmap[1] through sharing of experiences and knowledge;
2. Provide national and subregional contexts and provide good practices on the theme and the cluster of goals under review at the HLFP and the APFSD 2019; and
3. Support capacity building for countries in the subregion ahead of their presentations in 2019, building on presentations from Voluntary National Review (VNR) countries at the HLPF.

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[1] *The Regional Roadmap for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific* identifies opportunities for regional cooperation on identified Means of Implementation, and thematic issues. The means of implementation include (a) Data and statistics, (b) Technology, (c) Finance, (d) Policy coherence, and (e) North-South, South-South, international and regional partnerships. The identified thematic issues are (a) Leaving no one behind, (b) Disaster risk reduction and resilience, (c) Climate change, (d) Management of natural resources, (e) Connectivity for the 2030 Agenda, and (f) Energy.

Participants

The meeting was attended by officials and individuals from six countries of the subregion, comprising:

1. Government experts, representatives of institutions in ESCAP member States responsible for various aspects of implementing the SDGs in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
2. Representatives of civil society organizations and private sector organizations;
3. Experts from think tanks and academia; and
4. Other stakeholders involved in SDG implementation at national, regional & global levels.

Proceedings

The Forum was opened by *Mr. Zandanshatar Gombojav*, Minister and Chief Cabinet Secretary of Mongolia; *Ms. Beate Trankmann,* Resident Coordinator, United Nations Mongolia; *Mr. Baatarbileg Yondonprenlei,* Head of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Policy, Education, Culture and Science, Member of Parliament; and *Mr. Sangmin Nam*, Interim Head, East and North-East Asia Office, ESCAP. A keynote address was delivered by *Professor Jeffrey Sachs,* Special Advisor to UN Secretary-General on SDGs and Director, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

The subsequent sessions on the first day were moderated by *H.E. Mr. Tugsbilguun Tumurkhuleg*, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary and Permanent Representative of Mongolia to ESCAP (Session on Review of progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in East and North-East Asia); and *Mr. Sangmin Nam* (Review of selected Goals for the HLPF 2019). A series of presentations was delivered during the sessions, including on countries' progress as well as some aspects of the six focused goals in light of the key theme of the HLPF 2019 (inclusiveness, empowerment and equality). In addition, *Mr. Jinho Song*, Vice President of Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), presented the perspective of KOICA in light of supporting SDG 17. Working groups conducted a detailed review and discussion of the SDGs in focus through the lens of the theme of "empowering people, ensuring inclusiveness and equality."

Two special sessions were organized on the second day of the Forum. In special session (A), Government of Mongolia, together with the United Nations Resident Coordinating Office in Mongolia, highlighted Mongolia's SDG implementation and engagement of UN organizations and programmes based in Mongolia. The session was facilitated by *Ms. Undraa A.,* Member of Parliament, Chair, Parliamentary Sub-Committee on SDGs. The session speakers included representatives from the Parliament, senior officials from the Government of Mongolia, UN official, as well as civil society organization in Mongolia.

Special session (B) was moderated by *Mr. Soogil Young*, Emeritus member, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network Leadership Council, to highlight the perspectives of academics who are members of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) from China, Hong Kong, China, Japan, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, on challenges of implementing SDGs in light of the theme of the HLPF 2019.

The outcomes of the detailed review of the goals conducted on Day 1, were also reviewed and discussed. The final session shared and discussed information on the next steps, based on the presentation delivered

by ESCAP (*Ms. Katinka Weinberger*). A joint statement of civil society organizations attending the meeting was delivered by representatives of civil society.

All meeting documentation is available online.[2]

Summary of the discussion

Progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in North-East Asia

The Forum reflected on the progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and highlighted the key challenges and opportunities for the implementation at national and subregional levels.

In Japan, "SDGs Promotion Headquarters", established in 2016 and led by the Prime Minister, recently issued "Expanded SDGs Action Plan 2018", requesting all ministers to work towards implementation of the Plan. The Government is aiming to develop Japan's own "SDG model" characterized by three key aspects, i.e., promotion of society 5.0[3] and productivity revolution; SDG-driven revitalization of the regions; and empowerment of future generations and women. Thus, as part of the efforts to disseminate the best practices in both public and private sector, the Government launched Japan SDGs Award and SDG web-platform.

The Republic of Korea introduced various policies and schemes related to SDGs, in such areas as equal and quality education for all, promoting decent work (related to improving welfare, protecting vulnerable groups), climate change adaptation, and anti-corruption plan. Institutional responses include the establishment of Presidential anti-corruption & civil rights commission; a working group for SDG 4 in 2017 which involves the Ministry of Education, Korea National Commission for UNESCO and eight domestic educational institutions. The country saw good progress towards achievement of SDG 10. For instance, women participation in the political position and senior government officials significantly increased recently. Minimum wage increased by over 16% in 2018.

Mongolian government developed Sustainable Development Vision (SDV-2030) and Three Pillars Development Policy (TPDP), with own set of goals and indicators. TPDP serves as the key guideline for government investment decisions. TPDP for 2018-2020 consists of; multi-pillar economic development policy; fair, equitable, accountable and sustainable governance policy; and people-centred social policy. SDV, approved by the Mongolian Parliament in 2015, has four pillars, namely society, economy, governance and environment. While being consistent with SDGs, they are heavily focused on economic aspects and have less attention to such issues as gender, inequality, and climate change. The Government face the challenge of aligning public expenditures with these visions and SDGs in the midst of limited fiscal space, whereas a large proportion of government spending is directed to debt repayment and servicing.

The Russian Federation is also moving towards SDGs, although it may explore its own approach in implementing SDGs. For instance, one of the key areas is promotion of green economy, including reduction of waste, environmental education, and reduction of pollution. That objective is compatible with SDGs. Promotion of energy efficient technologies, ensuring social justice, are some other key areas.

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[2] https://www.unescap.org/events/north-east-asian-multistakeholder-forum-sustainable-development-goals
[3] http://www8.cao.go.jp/cstp/english/society5_0/index.html (footnote by the secretariat)

Review of the theme and selected Goals for the HLPF 2019

The thematic goals of APFSD and HLPF 2019 were reviewed in light of the overall theme, "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality" to elicit subregional perspective and challenges. Some of the views and perspectives presented during the Forum are given below.

Goal 4 (Quality education): While the North-East Asian countries are advanced in education-related indicators, as seen in such figures as secondary school enrolment rate and gender parity index, various challenges remain associated with Goal 4, particularly in relation to the quality of education. Thus, issues highlighted include inequality of access to quality education (e.g., by income, geographic location, gender disparity, etc.), and challenges in evaluating the quality of education. Discussion on the quality of education also touched upon the question of the role of education as a tool to learn values (e.g. of peace and sustainability), to learn rights people are entitled, or to enhance the opportunity for decent job.

Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth): The substantial economic growth experienced in North-East Asian countries have not been translated into decent jobs. Vulnerable employment rate remains high, and inequalities in the labour market (e.g., women, youth in disadvantage) persist. However, decent work is not only about employment. "Decent work" embraces various dimensions - work that is productive and meaningful, that pays enough to support families and does not compromise health, etc., and it requires inclusiveness and empowerment of people at the workplace. Furthermore, empowerment of the vulnerable group requires changes of mindset in the cultural context. For instance, in North-East Asia, the culture hinders the progress in women's empowerment.

Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities): Inequalities are related to all goals and empowerment/ inclusiveness/equality and remain as a challenge in both within and between countries in the North-East Asian countries. For instance, within a country, poverty and inequality can reinforce a vicious cycle among the working population as well, especially those in vulnerable employment (due to discrimination based on ethnic or social minority, etc.). Gender pay gap also persists in countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea; and development of IT potentially has negative impact on equality if it intensifies the concentration of wealth and alienates human (employment).

Goal 13 (Climate action): Environmental impacts hit the vulnerable population harder. For instance, irresponsible mining operation can affect herders and the poor who are reliant on subsistence. Climate issues need to be mainstreamed in national plans, policies and laws. China's comprehensive Five-year plan that reflects climate change and Japan's climate adaptation law are given as examples during the discussion. In the North-East Asian countries, urban population is fast growing. Urbanization drives climate change, as urban dwellers' increasing appetites for different foods, goods and energy put pressure on land, waters and climate. Increasing the livelihood of vulnerable groups and inducing behavioral change of urban citizens towards more sustainable lifestyle are the key to empower people and ensure inclusiveness.

Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions): SDG 16 is enabler and links to all the SDGs. In North-East Asia, challenges are lack of inter-governmental cooperation mechanisms on issues related to SDG 16, shrinking civic space or little space for independent CSOs through at varying degree. It was also pointed out that rule of law does not necessarily guarantee 'Peaceful societies' when it coincides with various inequalities, fear of the neighbours, stereotypes, xenophobia, racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, etc. The silence about militarization and increase in military spending, resonates loudly in the undermining of the progress of SDG 16. Such resources could be reallocated for the actual achievement of all of SDG 16.

Inclusiveness and empowerment: There were some commonalities across the goals in groups that need to be empowered, i.e., women, people with disability, low-income population, rural population, indigenous people and youth. Some of the groups identified are associated with goal specific challenges. For instance, in connection with Goal 4, girls, people with disability, low-income family, rural population, ethnic minority, etc. are identified as groups that need to be empowered and included to gain access to (quality) education. There are children with disabilities who are denied access to education. Centralization of opportunities and resources in cities are widening the gap between city and rural areas. In relation to Goal 8, the groups that need empowerment and inclusiveness also includes migrant workers, child labourers, younger generation particularly those who lack education. The concern was also raised about the possible replacement of workers by robots along with the advancement of technology. Poor people reliant on subsistence on herding and migration and coastal and small island communities are also identified as the group needed to be empowered in connection with the challenges associated with Goal 13.

Barriers and systemic issues: Many of the barriers to the empowerment, inclusiveness and equality are related to transparency and accountability; participation to voice their concern; participation in decision making process; human rights; engagement of specific sectors (business); institutional coordination across sectors, institutions, ministries and with business communities; appropriate allocation of resources including financing; policymaking shortcomings; and information/ data access for evaluation and awareness.

Policies and initiatives: The working groups identified policies to promote accountability, ownership, policy-making framework, enabling environment, and others. Policy framework needs to ensure, among others; open and inclusive policy-making process; evaluation and feedback from stakeholders; and monitoring of the empowerment of vulnerable groups. It also needs to strengthen the link between central and local governments, mainstream SDGs, and strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanism (e.g., climate change). Another important policy aspect is creation of an enabling environment – for instance, job creation, appropriate incentives, supporting capacity (education and training) of the vulnerable group, legislative support, and technology. Examples include, legislative change in financial transactions which allows access of migrant workers to financial services in the Republic of Korea; and Mongolia's policy to provide the technology for weather forecast and solar energy to help increase income of rural population.

Examples:

There are a number of examples suggested in the discussion which could shed light on possible solutions and lessons for empowerment, inclusiveness and equality. For instance;

Goal 4
- Volunteer programme to provide opportunities for students in rural area (China)
- National policy reform on college entrance exam to ease competition with open social dialogue (Republic of Korea)
- Special school and vocational training for children with disability (Democratic People's Republic of Korea)
- Awareness programme on rights to education of children with special needs (Mongolia)

Goal 13
- I Love Cities initiative (WWF)
- Climate inspector initiative (China)

Goal 16
- Open Government Partnership to mainstream social accountability

- "Peace with women" initiative introduced by the government to promote stronger roles of women to sustain peace (Republic of Korea)
- Citizen Voice in Action Model to strengthen social accountability (World Vision Mongolia)
- Global campaign to end violence against children (World Vision Mongolia)

The ESCAP secretariat invited participants to contribute further to the collection of case studies which will be followed up after the Forum.

The Forum discussed the findings of the working group in plenary and the relationship with a proposed preliminary framework to promote action on "empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality."

Protection of rights, some participants stressed, must be ensured together with the responsibility and accountability associated with it. There was also concern regarding the need to protect civic space. While civic space was considered essential for the protection of rights, none of the countries in North-East Asia was considered completely free.

For enhancing resources and capacities, social infrastructure, public transport, access to the internet are some of the enabling tools to empower people as they benefit the general public and support poor population to access to education and decent jobs. Education should also be viewed as a tool for empowerment. Two specific aspects were highlighted – education to strengthen understanding interdisciplinary issues, as well as civic education to promote understanding of the rights of people.

It was also highlighted that while transparency in the government is essential, need for visibility and transparency also applies to private sector. Institutional shortcomings in the areas of integration and policy coherence were also emphasized as needing to be addressed in order to advance on the theme.

"Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality": How knowledge institutions in North-East Asia view the challenge (Sustainable Development Solutions Network)

The session presented academics' perspectives on key challenges of implementing SDGs in their respective countries. There are some attempts to develop assessment methodologies of the status of sustainable development. That includes Sustainable Development Index and SDG dashboard developed by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN).

Perspective of the civil society organizations in North-East Asia

The participants from civil society organizations in China, Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation jointly made a statement on the North-East Asian Subregional Multistakeholder Forum on SDGs, recognizing the importance of the Forum. Noting the common challenges and achievements in the subregion, the statement urged ESCAP and governments of North-East Asia, to expand the scope of the subregional Forum (hosting civil society forum a day before the subregional forum, establishing the reference groups); to ensure inclusive participation (government participation, diverse stakeholders); to strengthen subregional / regional / global linkages on follow-up and review process, with concrete outcomes from the subregional Forum identifying subregional perspectives and priorities.

The statement was endorsed by organizations participating in the Forum, as well as other civil society organizations which supported the statement.[4]

Way forward for North-East Asia

In summary, the following points were observed during the Forum:

- The Forum benefited from the effective trilateral cooperation among ESCAP secretariat, Government of Mongolia and UN Mongolia. It showcased the ongoing partnership between the Government of Mongolia and the UN country team at national level and its link to subregional / regional channel through the Regional Commission.
- Despite the variation in socio-economic and environmental status, countries in North-East Asia share various challenges when it comes to equality, empowerment and inclusiveness.
- There are various good experiences shared in the theme based (group) discussion. It would be beneficial to follow up and collect further information, to facilitate experience sharing in the region.
- The special session co-organized by the Government of Mongolia and UN Mongolia provided a good opportunity for exchange of views from various stakeholders on initiatives and challenges on Mongolia's SDG implementation. It served as a precursor to the Voluntary National Review of Mongolia while it allowed the participants from other North-East Asian countries to witness the open discussion among policy makers and civil society participants in Mongolia.
- The civil society participants strongly supported multistakeholder engagement at subregional level and requested further outreach in the next Forum.

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[4] The statement is available on https://www.unescap.org/events/north-east-asian-multistakeholder-forum-sustainable-development-goals