

Incheon Communiqué (18 March 2022)

Sustainable Development Transition Forum 2021-2022

We, the participants of the 2021-22 Sustainable Development Transformation Forum issue this Communiqué to share our policy-relevant insights with the international community, national and subnational governments, and other stakeholders. The Forum was co-organised by the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development in Incheon, Republic of Korea, with the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). It met virtually world-wide during the week of 28 February to 3 March 2022 to discuss the topic of *“Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”*. With the aim of contributing to the discussions preceding the High-level Political Forum in July 2022, the Forum reflected on progress toward sustainable development goals (SDGs) #4 on Quality Education, #5 on Gender Equality, #14 on Life Below Water, #15 on Life on Land, and #17 on Partnerships.


Relentless Global Crises. The halfway point to 2030 has seen a convergence of global crises that is impeding progress toward the 17 global sustainable development goals (SDGs). The Forum was poised to view the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic only to be confronted with a new threat to global peace and with that, the Forum’s acknowledgement that peace is a fundamental precondition for achieving the SDGs. The loss of life and hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic weighed heavily on the Forum, especially the impact on livelihoods combined with the higher cost of basic necessities which exacerbated the vulnerability of marginalized members of society including youth, women and girls, Indigenous Peoples, the poor, and among the billions of people who depend directly on the land and ocean for their survival.

SDG 4: Quality Education. Front line educators had to adapt on the fly during the COVID-19 pandemic to learn new all-encompassing skills and topics, revealing the importance of an agile education ecosystem led by champions at the staff level. The digital world created unique opportunities for learning during the pandemic; however, at least 463 million school children could not access remote learning, revealing the need to bridge the alarming digital divide. The digital world gave educators and students access to the best minds in the world. At the same time, the activities of the worst minds highlighted the need for oversight to guard against fake news, false information, and loss of local or traditional knowledge and skills.

Discussions at the forum also illuminated the importance of partnerships and coalitions to help ensure continuity of implementation of programmes in the face of political instability. Building resilience to shocks was considered an imperative, through such means as leveraging social capital and citizen-based science and delivering land-based education.

The relevance of the mantra, ‘we manage what we measure’, was stressed at the Forum. UNESCO’s *Beyond Commitments* report put forth an assessment framework including equity and inclusion to see beyond averages, creating content fit for sustainable development, advancing cross-sectoral collaboration and quality of learning to see beyond access, and consideration of lifelong learning and collaboration. The ASEF’s *ARC8 Outlook Report* and *National Equity Policy Report* outlined risks and opportunities to consider when advancing inclusion in higher education, and aligned with UNESCO’s





framework, emphasized the importance of addressing the success of quality education to see beyond access, and engaging with civil society organizations as real partners in advancing equity.

SDG 5: Gender Equality. Evidence from the 2022 SDG Gender Index of Equal Measures 2030 and other indicators shows that progress on gender equality was off track even before the COVID-19 pandemic, stressing the need to “bend-the-curve” in relation to all targets. A trio of interlocking crises involving livelihoods, care, and the environment motivated UN Women’s *Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice* which calls for progress in key areas such as rebuilding local and global food systems with women food producers and vendors, investing in the care economy and in gender-responsive policies to mitigate and adapt to climate change. This approach also highlighted the crucial role of local communities with whom governments should seek to create partnership to realize progress in these key areas.


The COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing barriers and the uneven playing field that women and girls experience, necessitating the need for building forward better by transforming underlying structural barriers to catalyze a tipping point towards equality. Transformative strategies discussed for building forward better on gender equality included digital and educational behaviour change communication, feminist policies and budgets for equality in land tenure and care infrastructure, changing gender-blind data systems, transforming financial services to make banks more woman-able, and engaging men and boys as co-agents of change to spark ownership of shifting barriers to equality.

Forum discussions noted that as we strive for a more inclusive and sustainable future in the context of urban planning, it is critical that we understand the benefits and limitations to date of intersectionality in our work (i.e., race, caste, age, gender, etc.) so that we don't disregard the challenges of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. In the context of global business, currently less than 1% of spending by large corporations and government goes toward women-owned businesses, highlighting a practical leverage point in promoting women entrepreneurs in procurement supply chains.

SDG 14: Life Below Water: Forum participants were reminded that over 80% of global trade is carried by the sea and that 12 million tonnes of plastic waste enter the oceans annually. Plastics are omnipresent in our air, water, soil and food, from the highest mountain tops to the deepest ocean trenches. Transformative change was considered an urgent need, to cut down our plastic consumption and production habits. Encouragingly, a chat message during the Forum delivered the news that the United Nations Environment Assembly had just passed its resolution to address plastic pollution.

There were other reasons for participants of the forum to feel optimistic about the future. Discussion around the Blue Economy highlighted steps for transformation including accurate valuation of oceanic resources, integrating ocean-based assets in national and local strategies, and smart fiscal initiatives. The Republic of Seychelles, an archipelago of 115 islands in the Indian Ocean, was a case in point, where its *Marine Spatial Plan* provides an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to address climate change adaptation, marine biodiversity protection, and support to the Blue Economy. The Blue Economy in The Seychelles enables citizens to earn a living, such as through emerging sectors like aquaculture, and all the while, paying attention to the preservation of the sea itself, through such initiatives as beach cleanups where citizens are encouraged to not only clean up after themselves, but to also pick up at least five pieces of litter left by others. As well, the *Northwest Pacific Action Plan* administered by the





United Nations Environment Programme, continues to support integrated coastal and river-basin management and assessment of the marine and coastal environment.

With 2022 being the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture, the critical role of this sector in promoting decent jobs and women entrepreneurs was also discussed. Importantly, macro-level and bottom-up priorities need to be addressed to support women's change journeys, including stopping harmful fisheries subsidies, curbing illegal fishing, and investing in people and fair institutions, as well as sustainable production policies that promote fish for food and not for feed.

SDG 15: Life on Land: Food and food waste was a common theme across much of the discussion related to progress on SDG 15. As cited from the UN Environment Programme's *Global Environment Outlook Geo-6 Healthy Planet, Healthy People*, growing population will require 50% more food production this century while at the same time, land resources are diminishing. It was noted that globally, one-third of edible food is wasted and 77% of agriculture land is used for meat protein production, with many sources having significantly higher environmental impact compared to plant-based protein. Such evidence points to the reduction of food waste and dietary changes (shift away from Western-style diets, i.e., from animal-based to plant-based proteins) as two primary leverage points for transformation.

Emerging practices of Indigenous and local communities, among others, such as regenerative agriculture and agroecology, offer practical ways to achieve a circular economy to accelerate progress toward SDG 15. The Forum acknowledged that "we are what we eat" and highlighted the transformative potential of revisiting Indigenous Peoples' traditional food-systems, which are supporting collective well-being through a strong connection with the land and the environment to improve 21st century agricultural practices and ensure healthy land and healthy people. Further building on Indigenous traditional practices, nature-based solutions have (re)emerged as a practical and cost-effective means for delivering multiple benefits to climate and nature goals whilst promoting health and well-being.

At a specific policy level, the European Union's Green Deal was designed to deliver a new growth strategy, bringing together the environment, productivity, stability, and fairness; however, challenges exist in such areas as non-implementation of existing nature legislation, incoherence among agriculture and fisheries policies, and insufficient funding for specific conservation measures. The Forum also discussed challenges relating to protecting forest ecosystems. The brief reprieve from illegal logging pressure experienced in some parts of Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic is anticipated to give way to a gradual surge in global demand for precious logs, necessitating an immediate need for control measures including policing illegal timber movements, transboundary collaboration, and increased donor investment and national budget allocations for forest management. Sustainable solutions will also need to build partnerships with Indigenous and local communities, who have suffered financially during the pandemic, not only to avoid overexploitation of forest products, but also to realize long-term forest management through devolution and decentralization.

Incheon, Republic of Korea
28 February to 3 March 2022

