University Sector Support to UN Secretary-General's Call for a Decade of Action on the SDGs

Meeting Summary
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On July 9 and 10, over 100 universities from about 65 countries gathered to explore how academia as a sector can support the Decade of Action on the SDGs, particularly in the new era of COVID-19. This is part of the core mission of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), launched in 2012 to bring universities together in support of the SDGs. The pandemic is making it harder to achieve the SDGs globally, but universities have always been leaders in problem solving and addressing the world's greatest challenges, and can help countries 'build back better.'

Opening Remarks

In his remarks, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres noted that we are at a critical juncture, where new thinking is needed more than ever; there is an important role for universities to play, and he is grateful for their continued support to the SDGs. He also said that global networks of universities can support multilateralism, which is needed now more than ever (link to video).

Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed said that the SDSN has made a valuable contribution towards raising awareness of and promoting the SDGs, and called for accelerated action to achieve them. She also noted that crises can present opportunities, and the pandemic gives us a chance to address pre-existing inequalities through evidence-based policy. She also called on universities to support 3 key levers for change, (i) improving policy makers' knowledge, (ii) leapfrogging old technology and innovations, and (iii) building public trust and social cohesion (link to video).

Raj Shah, President of the Rockefeller Foundation, agreed that the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the pre-existing inequalities, but can be a moment of opportunity. Specifically, he noted we can build health and economic systems that are more inclusive through the pandemic response, and strengthen the global community. He also called on universities to fill gaps in leadership on the SDGs in areas where governments are not committed to implementation.

Lee Bollinger, President of Columbia University (USA), agreed that universities as public institutions can build trust within societies, and generate independent knowledge for the public good. However, he called upon academia to be self-critical when thinking about the SDGs, and ask themselves how their research responds to the needs of society. He also called on universities to be better connected to the world and take a global perspective.

Jeffrey Cheah, Foundation Chancellor of Sunway University (Malaysia), renewed his commitment to delivering on SDSN's mission, and highlighted the importance of working not just in universities but also in primary and secondary schools.

The Future of Higher Education in the Post-COVID World

The second session started with Jeffrey Sachs giving an overview of the current situation as a source of uncertainty and disruption. However, he stressed this moment is also a source of innovation, and universities can play a crucial role.

Sachs outlined three great shifts that have only been accentuated by COVID-19:
1. The environmental, pollution, and biodiversity crises as side effects of exponential economic activity.
2. Geopolitical shifts and the rise in technological and economic capacities that has resulted in a multipolar world, with the US acting in an antagonistic way to the multilateral system.
3. Technological shifts, with the digital revolution enabling big parts of the economy to move online, resulting in rising inequalities.

Sachs stressed that most of the G20 countries are overwhelmed with the epidemic, which can be conceived as a challenge to a highly divided global governance. Furthermore, he called for the international community to not solely depend on governance to deal with the crisis and said communication is a key element. The UN needs to be seen and used as a vital guide in this process. He also called for universities not to behave as observers, but as actors that can make a difference, having both the opportunity and responsibility to do so.

Peter Wells, Chief of Higher Education at UNESCO, identified some lessons learned from the pandemic, and praised the great adaptation efforts undertaken by universities worldwide. However, he echoed the concern regarding digital divides and geographical disparities in online education, stressing the need for capacity building in the use of modern technology to enhance learning. Moreover, he pointed to the risks, signalled by governments and networks, of leaving out communities, of eclipsing the personal interaction of students, of missing out on the exchange and joint research programmes.

Joanna Newman, Secretary General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) presented the new agreement of her institution with the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF). The three organisations, representing over 2000 universities in 140 countries, committed to three priority areas for collaboration to help achieve the 17 SDGs: (i) higher education for sustainable development, (ii) quality and vitality of higher education systems, and (iii) internationalisation in higher education. She stated that higher education institutions play a crucial role in achieving the SDGs, as they produce new knowledge and innovation to address global challenges. Although the role of universities and experts has been challenged in recent years, during the COVID-19 crisis, universities have risen to the challenge and proved critical contributions to the fight against the pandemic. She closed by saying that sustainable development faces a triple threat from COVID-19, climate change, and rising inequality, but that education is the necessary solution to these complex and pressing issues.

Hilligje van't Land, Secretary General of the IAU, presented a global survey of universities to see where they were standing given the pandemic. The survey found that higher education has been hit hard, and that education plays a crucial role in societies. Education has proven its worth in support to policy and decision making during this time of crisis, and such momentum should not fade away as the pandemic withdraws.

Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi, Director of UNU-IAS, noted that higher education plays a critical role in the recovery as it supports the next generation of learners, researchers, and politicians. It also helps stakeholders make informed decisions and, importantly, not going back to business as usual. Yamaguchi highlighted the main findings of their own survey conducted across 15 countries. They found that there is a need for systems thinking and the ability to analyse complexity in order to ensure better responses, and that building back better should go hand in hand with long term environmental perspectives.

Peter Lennie, Executive Director at the World University Network, stressed that networks are and will be determinant in tackling big world problems and in achieving the SDGs. He reminded the participants that, despite similarities, universities sit in different geographical, cultural, and legal environments. In his view, in order to achieve the SDGs, we must change behaviour, and for this we need to understand problems locally. He outlined multiple opportunities presented by the current crisis, in particular the opportunity to restore faith and trust in research, and the opportunity to show the value of international cooperation.

Wayne Frederick, President of Howard University, noted that universities are the ones addressing vexing issues in society and they play a unique role in the lives of the marginalized. Students around the globe are, understandably, focused on the need to address climate change and secure a future world for themselves and future generations. Higher education institutions must be at the forefront of providing them the platform to realise these goals. He also shared how Howard University is working to contribute to SDG 10 and social justice. The global movement following the killing of George Floyd demonstrates the need for American society to close the social gap as soon as possible.

Raghunath A. Mashelkar, President of the Jio Institute, stressed that universities should work to enable access equally. Universities should further scientific knowledge and preserve 'borderless science,' as unconstrained knowledge is our only defense against this unprecedented crisis. In his view, digitalisation, decentralisation and decarbonisation are processes that should go hand in hand and should be the focus of university actions. Finally, he noted that education is about learning, doing, and being, and so the value of social interaction in universities should not be overlooked as we turn to more online teaching.

Makoto Gonokami, President of the University of Tokyo and Chair of the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU), explained how the COVID-19 pandemic is testing humankind's natural resistance and highlighting our impact on planetary balance. President Gonokami stressed that we must enhance social-economic systems, specifically for the poorest. The Internet allows us an opportunity to connect, while new technologies can help reduce disparities and mitigate natural disasters; however, we must do better in leveraging these to save the natural world. In order to do this, we must establish trust in the global cyber commons. One such effort to take this work forward is the new Tokyo Global Commons Center, which is developing a *Global Stewardship Commons Index* to track how companies and countries are contributing to protecting the global commons.

Yong Qiu, President of Tsinghua University, explained how the Tsinghua Institute for the SDGs has made substantial contributions to SDG research and integration into policy and cooperation, including a dual masters program for the SDGs. In the wake of the pandemic, Tsinghua has created a "Cloud Class" for faculty and students to ensure on-time graduation for students. The University continues to cooperate with UNESCO to further improve online education. President Qiu stressed that future universities must be student driven, with smarter teaching practices, and provide inclusive forums to achieve the decade of Action.

Comments from the floor highlighted several key themes. One speaker called for a 'global module' that all students could take to have a basic understanding of sustainable development. Several speakers highlighted successful examples of dissemination of knowledge and collaboration, such as a project at Makerere University (Uganda) to manufacture ventilators. Others called for more investment in the infrastructure needed to support functioning universities, including roads and broadband connectivity; while others focused on the need for larger financial resources at underfunded institutions and more student scholarships to level the playing field.

The power of networks was stressed, underpinned by the energy and vigor of the more altruistic young generation. The need for better global cybersecurity, an understanding of human impacts on our global commons, and the need to live more symbiotically in the future were raised. It was agreed by most speakers that addressing the environmental but also the socioeconomic disparities (in particular racism, diversity, and connecting with marginalized groups) will help us prevent problems around the world.

One participant noted that data transformation is the key to (i) inclusiveness and (ii) reduce disparities. This can help with COVID, as well as the climate issue.

Strengthening Global University Networks for Sustainable Development

This session opened with a brief presentation by Maria Cortes-Puch, Vice President of Networks at SDSN, followed by open discussion moderated by SDSN President Jeffrey Sachs. In his remarks, Sachs emphasized the need to respond to the increasingly virtual world by working together to develop new tools, modules, teaching materials, and shared virtual classrooms. He said creativity in building opportunities for students and faculty to learn from each other will be essential.

Sachs also called for consideration of an 'SDG 18' on digital technology and services. Universal access to broadband and other services should now be considered a basic right for everyone. He noted that universities need to do more at the local scale to find solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic and other sustainable development challenges. This includes (i) improved public health management with contact tracing, (ii) moving towards a safe and sustainable energy system, and (iii) contributing to a global values effort, building shared perspectives and understanding.

Maria Cortes-Puch presented the SDSN networks program, which now includes 38 National and Regional SDSNs that localize and teach the SDGs and support SDG implementation through development of rigorous, long-term pathways and mobilizing partners. She also described the application process for universities that are not yet members but would like to join.

A rich discussion ensued. Several institutions shared concrete examples of their own projects and programs. A degree program in Russia offers specialized SDG tracks. Others were re-thinking their teaching methods in response to the pandemic.

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, several participants said the response has fostered new collaborations and accelerated sustainability research, and called for more open dialogue. Many others said their universities were involved in efforts to rebuild better (ex. Italy) and implement sustainability measures in university planning (Mexico). One speaker stressed the importance of long-term preparation for what is to come, beyond the current crisis.

Universities and the COVID-19 Crisis

Peter Piot, Director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, opened by sharing his experience working on the HIV pandemic. He noted 700,000 people still die annually, so technology and treatment is not enough to fully halt this disease. Regarding COVID-19, he noted the disease is traveling and accelerating, doubling every 6 weeks. He warned that we are only at the beginning, and that there will be several waves and further flare ups, so we have to shift our thinking from dealing with an acute epidemic to living with this virus. Even if we are able to develop a vaccine, we don't have the production capacity to rapidly roll it out to 6 billion people, and we are seeing this emerge as a geopolitical issue ("vaccine nationalism"). He noted that the pandemic is disrupting university research programs, not only teaching.

Comments from the floor highlighted three key themes. The first was the various ways in which universities responded to the pandemic, including an emergence of interdisciplinary projects and the importance of new partnerships and global solidarity. The second was about the evolution of the university sector and what universities will be like in this new "post-COVID" world. Finally, the question of resources for universities to face this transition, including bridging the IT divide, was raised by several participants.

In his closing remarks, Piot noted his institution is heavily invested in reducing their carbon footprint, so videoconferencing had already been set up when the pandemic hit. He also said cross-disciplinary work and partnerships will become even more important.

Universities and Universal Values

In this session Owen Flanagan from Duke University gave an introductory presentation, highlighting universal values as one of the three necessary conditions (Science, Money and Ethics) to achieving the SDGs. Flanagan raised several discussion points, namely: the university's role in discovering, conveying, maintaining and promoting values; whether universities could do this while at the same time maintaining objectivity (i.e. allowing open debate about values); how universities respond to the charge of being purveyors of parochial liberal democratic values (and not always truly egalitarian ones); and what the prospects are for global moral education across cultures.

A lively discussion followed where several participants agreed that the role of universities is not only to support students in their professional education and career, but also preparing them for the ethical dilemmas they might face. As one participant put it, universities should be a workplace where people can flourish and grow, not only professionally, but also morally. Another university leader pointed out that many universities cannot successfully fulfil their mission in a digitized world (due to the Covid-19 crisis) without funding (e.g. to purchase laptops for students and teachers, or ensure they have broadband at home). Two institutions also presented initiatives; one university is launching a voluntary university review and the other a sustainability task force.

In his closing remarks, Owen Flanagan agreed that universities should focus on their mission to make the world a better place for future generations, as pointed out by many speakers. He also encouraged institutions to think about COVID-19 as a stress test, which highlighted fragility and vulnerabilities, and we now have an opportunity to tackle and speak out against them.

Universities and Climate Change

Jeffrey Sachs introduced this session by highlighting that climate change is the next big crisis that we are facing. He noted that we are at an inflexion point and must think through how we can rebuild better.

Phoebe Koundouri, Professor at the Athens School of Business and Economics, called for universities to ask themselves how they can contribute to addressing the climate change crisis, which is the biggest we face, as even COVID-19 is the result of habitat destruction. The climate crisis is dramatically urgent, as we must limit emissions by 60% by 2030.

The pandemic has shown the capacity of governments to respond to dramatic events, as well as the remarkable reactions from people around the world. In this moment of big crisis and clarity, universities must use their knowledge, resources, and abilities to promote green and participatory development. It is crucial to mobilize academia to work with policy makers and the private sector on addressing climate change. Networks of universities, such as SDSN, can help coordinate activities and link knowledge around the world. In addition, SDSN has an easy and practical guide that can be very useful, [Getting started with the SDGs in Universities.](#)

Koundouri also presented the European Green Deal, an ambitious plan consistent with the SDGs. The pandemic has propelled the EU into a recession, and the region is designing a recovery fund. This fund needs to be aligned with the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. This will be the case everywhere: recovery and reconstruction need to be green, and systems innovation is a key driver of the success of these plans.

Professor Bin Yang, Provost of Tsinghua University, briefly presented the Global Alliance of Universities on Climate Change (GAUC). Launched in 2019 by eight universities, member institutions promote excellence in education and research and have committed to action on climate change. Key features of the alliance include (i) cooperation in science and technology and policy development, (ii) research on climate change solutions and

multilateral research projects, and (iii) technology, policy, and financing to address climate change. The Alliance's inaugural forum took place in November 2019. At that event student participants developed the Youth Declaration on Climate Change, which was submitted to the UN Secretary-General. Numerous other events have followed.

Several participants took the floor. Universities, one speaker explained, will need to transform the way they conduct their activities and, to do so, they will need their leadership, staff, and students to be engaged. Several participants alluded to the importance of university campuses operating as living labs to showcase successful models of greening spaces. Another speaker mentioned how the hyper competitive culture of universities can hinder positive change. Speakers from several institutions mentioned that they are already aligning their teaching and research to the SDGs.

Professor Koundouri concluded that it would be useful to map all initiatives taking place within universities, and insisted on the need to co-create solutions for successful uptake, which would again require multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Provost Bin Yang highlighted the need to define economic recovery focusing on the next crisis, namely climate change. He responded to questions from the floor, assuring participants that GAUC is not intended to be a small circle of elite universities; rather, it will provide a platform for many universities to join and participate.

An SDSN Action Plan for the Post-COVID Recovery

Jeffrey Sachs opened with a discussion of the SDGs, saying all 17 as a unit are founded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and that they can be described as supporting 3 Pillars; economic development, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Sachs said our current model of capitalism produces only economic development, but not social inclusion, and perhaps the opposite. And it is not producing environmental sustainability. He stressed the need for new rules to drive our economics and politics, the key being economic growth that is socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

Sachs described 6 societal transformations to achieve the SDGs; (i) education and knowhow (skills, technology, innovation), (ii) health and well-being, (iii) clean energy and industry (including decarbonization, the circular economy, and pollution reductions), (iv) sustainable land use (deforestation, agriculture), (v) sustainable cities, and (vi) digital technologies (including inclusion, telehealth, online banking).

Sachs stressed that a core part of our thinking has to be scaled transformation, or solutions that match the scale of today's issues. He highlighted the need to think of scale and timing, stating that we have to face the fact that we haven't used society's resources to protect the climate, realize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or suppress the current pandemic.

In terms of Universities working to achieve the SDGs, the recurring themes over the two-day webinar were empowering young leaders and engaging in an intergenerational dialogue (training the next generation), COVID-19 response mechanisms, climate change responses, post-COVID Green Recovery, broad access to online education (in response to the immediate crises and in the longer term to extend access and reach), interdisciplinary hubs and initiatives, global and cross-university SDG initiatives, instilling global values, campuses as living laboratories, and Voluntary University Reviews (VURs).

Sachs called on university leaders to mobilize resources to support the SDGs. He mentioned the vast wealth that exists, such as Jeff Bezos and his estimated US $188 billion net worth. Sachs urged these people to be philanthropists. If we can raise the resources that are needed for students to thrive online, faculty and systems experts

can assist societies in solving urgent challenges. We need to help the world's universities play this leadership role.

Comments from the floor highlighted several key themes. One speaker highlighted the role of universities in promoting values in their communities and among students. Universities are the institutions where values are declared, put into practice, taught, and discussed in open spaces.

Several speakers mentioned the need for greater collaboration, including interdisciplinary hubs and initiatives, building a new generation of researchers and scholars, and bringing more evidence into policy-making. An example from Italy brought public and private institutions together to work on climate neutrality. Comments from African institutions emphasized the need for a larger pipeline of students and scholars. Comments also highlighted the importance of internet access for all students, and access to journals and library resources.

Others called for higher taxes to the wealthiest citizens to raise sufficient financial resources to pursue the SDGs targets and promote a new way of understanding the whole framework of sustainable development.

Sachs thanked everyone for a rich two-day discussion and announced the drafting of a public statement on the commitment of universities that will eventually be presented to the UN Secretary-General and Deputy Secretary-General.