CLIMATE & SDGS CONFERENCE

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UN HEADQUARTERS
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Global Conference Drives Integrated Action on Climate and Sustainable Development Goals to Accelerate a Just and Inclusive Transition

A global conference to push for integrated and accelerated action on climate and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was held at the United Nations on 16 July 2023, bringing together Ministers and high-level representatives from government, business and civil society, among over 400 in-person and nearly 4,000 virtual participants from 140 countries.

The Fourth Global Conference on Strengthening Synergies Between the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was co-convened by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as a special event of the 2023 UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

Position paper for the 2023 High-Level Political Forum, prepared by the ISC Fellows

RESCUING AND INTEGRATING THE GLOBAL AGENDA:

HARNESSING SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY MORE EFFECTIVELY

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM 2023

Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels

Scientific and Technological Community Major Group is co-convened by the International Science Council (ISC) and the World Federation of Engineering Organizations (WFEO)

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HEADLINES:

- **INTEGRATION NOT FRAGMENTATION.** We **must** urgently adopt a **transformative, systemic approach** to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda that recognizes the **interdependencies** of the SDGs and other global policy frameworks and is supported by **coherent roadmaps, narratives and actions**. These should draw on the classification of the six integrative SDG transformations and explore the potential to consolidate composite targets and indicators.

- **BEYOND RHETORIC**. We **must** move the central promise of "Leaving no-one behind" beyond rhetoric with the UN and Member States placing a strong focus on **building capacities and capabilities at all levels**, forging a **social contract** for everyone and sharing **positive narratives** around decisions and practices that work for all.

- **THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY**. The world's political, scientific and civil society communities **must** vigorously increase their efforts to **strengthen the science-policy-society interface**, accounting for local realities and needs, and ensuring that decision-making at all levels – global, regional, national and local – is rigorously evidence-informed. Science, technology and innovation should be at the heart of integration, transformation and action, and the ISC stands ready to work with all communities as the global voice for science.

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), provides a vision of an aspirational, equitable and just future for all, thriving on a safe and resilient planet. Together with other key multilateral agreements, it provides a compass for reorienting development in a fundamentally new direction for the benefit of all people and the planet. The window of opportunity within the 2030 timeframe is rapidly closing and demands urgent action and genuine commitment on all fronts.

THE 2030 AGENDA IS NOT ON TRACK

While differential progress has been made across some SDGs since 2015, it is **indisputable that all SDGs are lagging** and recent shocks – pandemics, wars, climate change, economic crashes - have thrown the world even further off course. The urgency of the 2030 Agenda risks being lost at a time of multiple crises when international cooperation and concerted political will are paramount in tackling shared and profound challenges, and building a resilient, just and sustainable world for everyone: we must use the "power of unity and solidarity to overcome the biggest test of our times" (Guterres, 2021[1]).

Restoring human and planetary health is paramount for achieving the SDGs and building the foundations for a true transformation; one that recognizes people as part of nature and the safe and resilient functioning of the Earth system as a precondition for human well-being. Already, there is a real and present danger of irreversible natural and social tipping elements, such as the destruction of ecosystems, unabated climate change, increasing poverty and inequalities compounded by recent crises.

INTEGRATION NOT FRAGMENTATION: A TRANSFORMATIVE[2] SYSTEMIC APPROACH

The SDGs were conceived as an integrated and holistic agenda, but their implementation has been managed through sectoral and institutional silos, due to fragmented governance, regulation, financing and monitoring. It is vital to unite efforts at all levels and foster a genuine understanding of the multifaceted challenges we face. This will unlock multiple shared benefits, build resilience to risks and facilitate collaboration: it requires a concerted, collective effort, from rethinking funding conditions to integrated monitoring and evaluation systems.[3]

Further, the SDGs are an integral part of other interrelated global frameworks with important synergies and multiple benefits, including the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and New Urban Agenda. Interconnected and interdependent, they require a joined-up approach with sustained and sustainable investment – led by the UN and Member States - on a longer time-horizon (to 2050), to maximize synergies and minimize trade-offs. Without this, they all risk failure.

There is an urgent need to develop **coherent roadmaps** for achieving the collective ambitions of these global policy frameworks; for scaling up impactful interventions at all levels; and for experimenting with novel interventions related to – for example – the emergence of new technologies or the emergence of new behaviours, lifestyles, norms and values.

The roadmaps should be framed around:

- the **six integrative SDG transformations** articulated in numerous scientific assessments e.g. The World in 2050[4] (2018, 2019, 2020) and the Global Sustainable Development Report[5] (GSDR, 2019): (1) Human capacity, well-being and health; (2) Consumption and production toward sustainable and just economies; (3) Decarbonization and universal energy access; (4) Food and nutrition, biosphere and water; (5) Urban and peri-urban areas and mobility; (6) Global environmental and human commons including the digital revolution;
- the use of *composite* **rather than disaggregated targets and indicators** for monitoring nexus issues and identifying critical paths of interdependency up to and beyond 2030;
- **supported and expanded pilot countries, regions and communities** that provide a rich portfolio of diverse approaches towards a common goal and include **compelling people-oriented success stories** that align global goals with local and regional implementation and examples of overcoming barriers to change. Such "bright spots" can inspire and motivate younger generations and accelerate change;
- a **compelling economic case** for why long-term political commitment to building resilience and a green economy now (through managing risk and uncertainty, prevention and recovery, mitigation and adaptation) is vital (ISC, 2023[6]).

Transformative and disruptive systemic change requires robust governance, scientific insight, business readiness, technological solutions and social innovation, ethical and sustainable finances, trade models and investment, and incentives to retire old ways and facilitate the uptake of new ones. We need concerted efforts to address **systemic barriers to change**, which include persistent inequalities, political short-termism and global capitalism that lacks regulation and seeks only profit. We need to tackle spillovers and negative externalities, such as the disregard of negative environmental and social impacts from production to consumption, to meaningfully assess progress.

Transformative change and innovation need **robust governance** and "social steering" to ensure they are responsibly regulated and democratized; the rapid and pervasive diffusion of digital innovations such as artificial intelligence can bring both multiple benefits and multiple risks. The response to COVID-19 with the development of vaccines in breathtaking time is a powerful illustration of how vigorous acceleration can be achieved when the world faces shared and profound vulnerabilities, and how the monetization and politicization of knowledge renders everyone vulnerable if access to beneficial innovation is not universal.

BEYOND RHETORIC: BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY WHERE IT IS NEEDED MOST

Multiple transformative pathways are required across public and private communities, cities and businesses, and different stakeholders – citizens' movements, indigenous peoples, scientific, engineering, medical and other communities. Pathways to sustainability may come from diverse and sometimes unexpected places, requiring an urgent priority for **building capacities and capabilities at all levels**. National capabilities and capacities are heterogeneous and tend to be lower in countries where most needed. Knowledge production and provision need to be valued in all countries by improving access to science and education, particularly in countries where it is not universal. To achieve this, all sciences (natural, social, medical, engineering etc.) need to evolve and become ever more responsible, ethical and inclusive with concomitant strengthening of science education, communication and literacy.

Multiple forms of knowledge are required to develop step-by-step evidence-based targets across all sectors, with actionable insights to test, apply and scale solutions at different levels. We must step up – and openly learn from – the aforementioned **pilot countries, regions and communities**. We need to systematically assess and communicate the **multiple benefits for people and planet** of operationalizing the six SDG transformations in an inclusive way. Positive narratives are essential across policies and practices to maximize synergies and incentivize action: storytelling is critical to nurturing systems leadership that connects local needs with global action, sharing learning from champions who have delivered impactful action and inspiring all to be proactive.

Everyone, everywhere has agency, and must be part of a **new social contract** - an implicit moral and ethical agreement among all members of society for the 2030 Agenda and other related global agreements and frameworks. Everyone has a stake and can play their part, from governments and business to civil society and local communities.

THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY: STRENGTHENING THE SCIENCE-POLICY-SOCIETY INTERFACE

Determined, accelerated, timebound and spatially explicit strategies and roadmaps at all scales must draw on the best available knowledge. A **strong science-policy-society interface** requires actionable and evidence-based knowledge for decision-making, underpinned by transdisciplinary collaboration, integrated systems perspectives and new ways of organizing knowledge co-production with multiple stakeholders to achieve shared global outcomes.

Enabling mission-oriented research for sustainability in all science and engineering disciplines must be one of the key priorities of governments and science funders in pursuing the SDGs. Accelerating SDG implementation requires visionary thinking and fundamentally disruptive actions from funders worldwide, stepping out of business-as-usual approaches to funding science and creating supportive institutional arrangements for nurturing inclusive and impactful sustainability science. To be launched at the 2023 HLPF, the ISC has established a **Global Commission on Science Missions for Sustainability**[7] that represents an institutional funding model for operationalizing science missions to support SDG implementation. Balancing curiosity-driven and mission-driven science is vital: for example, the mRNA technology for COVID-19 vaccines emanated from four decades of under-funded curiosity science for therapeutic solutions.

The President of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, Csaba Kőrösi, has summarized the challenge ahead as the focus on "Solutions through solidarity, sustainability and science." Science, education and evidence-based knowledge from multiple sources must be central to a new, integrated agenda. Recently launched, the "Group of Friends on Science for Action"[8] will help provide the knowledge required to support UN Member States in their decision-making and strengthen evidence-informed policy making in the UN system.

We must support **transformative science, engineering, medicine and other forms of knowledge** to be truly integrative and inclusive – engaging providers and users of science from the outset in problem definition and solutions design – and truly transdisciplinary – using natural, political and social sciences to understand levers for change. In promoting knowledge to action, strengthening the science-policy-society interface and supporting mission-oriented research, **we can build the conditions for transformation.**

Despite enormous challenges, we must make every effort to build a governance architecture that steers us towards common goals and shared benefits, catalyzes positive and impactful change, and enables us to readily adapt to our fast-changing world. We must remain **hopeful**, building confidence and a positive vision for our collective future.

References:

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