

Alpbach-Laxenburg Group

Official Retreat
30 August – 1 September 2015
Alpbach, Tyrol, Austria

Synthesis Document

Background

Now in its third year, the Alpbach-Laxenburg Group (ALG), at its 2015 retreat, devoted its expertise to examining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, specifically, to meeting the challenges involved in making the transformation to sustainability a reality.

Recent thinking has taught us the importance of cooperating to achieve the SDGs, which are to be adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015. We also know how many question marks there are in our current approaches to the SDGs and the almost boundless efforts required to bring them to fruition.

No one sector of society can make our sustainable dreams come true—not science, government, business, industry, civil society, academia, or the arts. All sectors need to share their concerns and perspectives about these issues to ensure the best possible outcomes for the whole of mankind.

Bringing experts from all sectors together, the ALG 2015 retreat sought not only illuminate the most appropriate pathways to a sustainable future but also demonstrate how best to tread them.

Working in both plenary and working group format, the ALG participants identified, based on experience and past learnings, the key issues (challenges and barriers), outcomes and next steps to support the effective implementation of the SDGs.

This document provides a brief overview of these discussions.

Key Discussion Points

- Recognize that the development and adoption of the SDGs is a major global accomplishment but is just the beginning – implementation is key
- How to learn from and build on the momentum and success of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)?
- SDGs are outcomes not strategies
- Remain focused on goal and quantification
- Measurement mechanisms are a prerequisite for implementation and accountability
- Need for a holistic and systems approach to implementation – see it as a package and not just individual goals – maximize the multiple co-benefits across goals
- New multi-stakeholder approaches/partnerships – e.g., SE4ALL, are required
- Better Communication
- Sustainability education is key – prepare and support the next generation

- How can the 'old' co-exist with the 'new' during the transition from the old to the new to achieve the necessary transformation and not act as a barrier, e.g., investment in renewables vs subsidies for fossil fuels
- Geopolitical complexities are a real challenge for implementation but needs to be inextricably linked to SDG implementation
- Given that implementation is country-specific, the messaging and mobilization needs to be country specific and consistent with national economies and priorities
- Recognize and acknowledge different expertise and the relevant and respective roles in implementation – e.g., politics, scientists, technologists, etc.,
- Solutions need to be socially acceptable
- Need for alternative global governance and negotiation mechanisms, particularly in relation to global commons, as current systems are failing
- Ensure ownership by everyone
- Need to negotiate better as partners – need for more dialogue
- Need to make a compelling business case for SDG implementation on national and international level

Following these general discussions, the participants converged around eight topics they felt were critical for implementation.

Voice of the Arts

- The arts enhance personal fulfillment and happiness, provide a sense of individual identity, and through the constant striving for personal excellence, provides personal growth through increased awareness, all of which are essential prerequisites for the transition to a sustainable future
- Need to call on artists to engage in participating and representing the sustainable development agenda in their works and collaborate with decision makers
- Need more appropriate open spaces for artistic works showcasing the sustainability agenda

Transformational Agenda – Obstacles and Challenges for Change

- Need to overcome vested interests to get started/accelerate the necessary transformations by focusing on positive agendas/narratives for smart lifestyles
- SDG implementation should be seen as an opportunity and early movers will be at a distinct advantage
- Holistic systems based approaches that unite the three elements of sustainability will be imperative

Science & Technology Interface

- Acceptable technology will be a key enabler and contributor to both implementation and monitoring of the SDGs and supporter of the needed lifestyle changes
- Need for improved science communications and better translation/translators of science to a wide variety of audiences including policy makers, business, and civil society
- Need for improved incentives for scientists to provide policy and decision making advice

Geopolitics and International Governance

- Geopolitics and SDG implementation are inextricably linked – implementation will be affected by the geopolitical landscape and vice versa
- Cannot afford to forget failed states and regions in the solutions
- Need to proactively scan the impacts of geopolitical tensions and conflict on the sustainable development agenda, e.g., the impacts of mass migration etc.

National Governance Arrangements and Mechanisms

- Transparent national SDG implementation delivery plans and/or strategies will be important and need to be consistent across all levels of government
- Need to radically transform government architectures to be more horizontally integrated to reflect the complexity and integrated nature of the sustainable development agenda
- Implementation of SDGs should be included in national budgets
- Globally-consistent national monitoring systems need to be put in place to ensure accountability

Communicating with Impact

- SDG implementation will fail without effective communication
- Critically important to find ways to personalize and internalize the SDG agenda across all stakeholder groups as a way to generate ownership and a call to action
- No clarity at present as to what the message is, what the communication and mobilization strategy is, and who is responsible
- Simple, easily-understood 10-second grabs will be critical to move decision makers; e.g., within 12 months we will (i) move \$500 million to sustainability- based investments; (ii) reach out to 10 million youth to engage their friends around sustainability; (iii) have 500 companies move to completely sustainable operations

Action Plans for the Global Commons

- Learn from the success of the MDGs, especially the health goal, to identify effective means of sustainably managing the global commons
- Multi-stakeholder alliances involving all the keys players to co-design and co-implement solutions are a necessary prerequisite
- Need to develop a set of shared economic and social values with strong support from science and technology and to leverage public finances to support these stakeholder processes

Energy and Climate Change – as examples of the implementation of key goals

- Sustainable energy is a key enabler of many of the SDGs and can provide multiple co-benefits, e.g., improved air quality, health improvements, climate change mitigation etc.,
- Solutions need to be flexible and context specific and take advantage of leapfrogging possibilities
- Energy R&D investments need to triple to meet the challenge
- New energy investment business models and institutional arrangements will be necessary to accommodate the changing energy sector landscape and the increasing role of non-conventional, game changing players

Although time is of the essence and there is an increasing sense of urgency that things needs to happen quickly, implementation will not happen overnight and there is no silver bullet solution. Effective implementation will require a globally, regionally, nationally, and sub-nationally coherent set of implementation pathways that will take time, patience, and an enormous amount of commitment and good-will to get right – but get right we must.