

Chapter 6

Cross-Cutting Approaches for Achieving the SDGs

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Introduction: Our collective ambition is at risk

We have been told since well before 2015 and the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that the success of global sustainability frameworks depends on a ‘whole-of-society’ approach, a true application of systems thinking and meaningful stakeholder engagement, where key actors in society, governments at all levels, experts from a wide range of fields and regular people, work together with a common goal in mind - an economy and civilisation that works for people and planet. People-centred, planet-sensitive policies are at the very heart of ensuring this approach, securing our planet for current and future generations and building an economic system based not on endless growth, endless profit and endless extraction, but on ensuring the wellbeing of all, including our planetary systems - a true application of ‘leaving no one behind.’

Nevertheless, even with this understanding of how best to ensure the success of sustainable development policies and frameworks, we still cannot seem to wrap our heads around the *how* - even as we proclaim the need to unite all forces in society from the very halls of global power and inside the UN system. As we continue to pay lip service to a whole-of-society approach, we simply cannot get our acts together as the arbiters, leaders, coordinators, vanguards, champions and indeed, the very secretariats of critical global sustainability frameworks.

We talk constantly about ‘interlinkages,’ ‘synergies’ and ‘nexus approaches,’ trying to understand how best to build bridges among many of the implementation and review processes of global sustainability frameworks - like the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR), the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and many others. We profess our faith in and commitment to bringing key stakeholders together, breaking down silos between ministries and different levels of government, whether vertically or horizontally, and empowering people to transform how we live and how the world works. We very clearly know the wide variety of lingo and terminology - the UN jargon (to be frank, what I have just written is a perfect example of the world in which I operate!).

We are in the UN for a reason after all.

Still, it is important to bring a different perspective to the forefront, a different approach to many of these global policy discussions - one that seeks to expand upon the *kinds* of stakeholders who sit around the table, and include others who are engaged in the day-to-day work of implementation.

A multi-stakeholder, *multi-sectoral* approach is critical

The global policy processes that are at the heart of our work in the UN system have done a decent job of ensuring the participation and engagement of critical rights holder groups and other constituencies relevant to our aforementioned whole-of-society approach - women, children and youth, workers and trade unions, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, farmers and so many others,¹ must not only have a seat at the table, but their seat should come with an even more enhanced right to impact policy, shape the direction of negotiations and support decision making.

Nonetheless, while engagement mechanisms like the major groups and other stakeholders (MGoS) should be strengthened, there is also a need to provide spaces for key economic sectors in the work that we all do. The UNFCCC process, thanks to the Paris Agreement, has already implemented something like this - ensuring the Observer constituencies, from youth (YOUNGO) to women (WGC), are preserved, while also creating a platform for multi- and cross-sectoral climate action - the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (MPGCA).² While the MPGCA is not perfect and in fact could do much better, it has ensured that core sectors of the economy are engaged in deliberations around the action agenda of the UNFCCC process. The specific sectoral groups activated by the MPGCA include:

- In terms of natural systems -
 - Land-use
 - Oceans and coastal zones
 - Water
- In terms of sustainable infrastructure -
 - Human settlements
 - Transport
 - Energy
 - Industry³
- In terms of further, newly added cross-cutting themes:
 - Resilience
 - Finance and investors

As a co-Focal Point for the Transport Thematic Group within the MPGCA (together with a representative of the International Transport Forum of the OECD), it is my duty to ensure that transport sector voices are included in the climate change process - facilitating their engagement

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/mgos>

² <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/marrakech-partnership-for-global-climate-action>

³ https://unfccc.int/files/paris_agreement/application/pdf/marrakech_partnership_for_global_climate_action.pdf

and amplifying the work they are already doing on the ground to scale up the transformation of transport, as well as to ensure that transport is aligned with and supports the delivery of sustainability frameworks. It is no easy task, working to bring together a diverse array of entities and transport modes (like land, aviation and maritime transport), each with its own set of interests and unique politics.

This complexity is especially augmented when you consider that aviation and maritime transport have their own intergovernmental policy processes - the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) - rife with tense negotiations and active stakeholders. As for land transport, there is the need to balance the positions and interests of so many stakeholders, each with complementary and equally important visions and concerns, but who have only recently been able to come together to bridge divides and ally with one another for a larger goal. For example, those advocating for a focus on electric mobility, the wider electrification of vehicle fleets and the total phase out of the internal combustion engine (ICE) are on one side, and those more focused on scaling up the availability of and access to walking, cycling and public transport infrastructure and services, particularly in the cities of the Global South, are on the other. Even though both sets of actors have been moving away from rhetoric that often pushed for 'either/or,' to 'both/and,' finding greater entry points for synergies and more united advocacy, these contrasts were especially exemplified at the UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow, United Kingdom. There, the UK Presidency itself entered the fray and championed an approach much more focused on motor vehicle electrification and ICE phase out, and much less on walking, cycling and public transport,⁴ leaving it up to key stakeholders working with the Egypt COP27 Presidency the following year to balance this out with a Presidency initiative that focused solely on urban mobility - Low Carbon Transport for Urban Sustainability (LOTUS).⁵

Still, despite these often difficult to manage challenges, each of these actors brings something to the table - especially those entities and networks that are often left out of the highly political processes inherent to UN intergovernmental negotiations. No matter what happens in those policy spaces, the world still needs these transport entities and modes of transport to be part of the solution as ultimately, the realisation of the Paris Agreement (and of course, the other global sustainability frameworks) depends on their real world, on the ground transformation.

Staying in the realm of transport, let me move on to an actual real-world example, to show why we need multi-sectoral engagement. Let's focus on public transport operators - entities that work in cities and towns around the world, from massive, sprawling metropolitan areas, to smaller urban settlements, and who are very often disregarded when ministers are making grand speeches and negotiators are making deals in the context of UN sustainability processes.

In the end, it is service providers like these public transport operators who have to be included when it comes to implementation, as they will need the support, finance, capacity building and political will to ensure they are playing a role in helping to solve the climate crisis, while also

⁴ <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230105153249/https://ukcop26.org/transport/>

⁵ <https://cop27.eg/#/presidency/initiative/lotus>

ensuring no one is left behind when it comes to access and continuity of services when disaster strikes or if another pandemic hits. Public transport operators, and (in the case of many cities in the Global South), informal transport providers, have the critical responsibility of helping people move around the world's cities, to access economic opportunities, social services, recreation, friends and family and so much else. This is especially the case in places where there are low motorisation rates, and people rely solely on the services provided by these organisations. Yet oftentimes, public transport is taken for granted and rarely provided the support it needs and the funding necessary to grow operations, which would have the most massive benefit in terms of people served and emissions avoided. So even while governments make pledges around climate change, they continue to facilitate the financing of transport projects that have the least benefit to their societies - roads and highways made for cars, whose construction often rips up existing neighbourhoods and destroys walkability, all in the name of perceived political wins that many believe will relieve urban congestion and improve quality of life in the city.

The myth that more roads means less congestion has already been disproven one hundredfold. Better quality of life in cities comes from more walking, more cycling and more public transport - period (more information available via SLOCAT⁶ and GIZ⁷). In light of this, UN processes have a lot to learn from these transport providers and should make an effort to provide more meaningful platforms for their engagement, similar to what is happening in the UNFCCC through the Marrakech Partnership. This kind of engagement will bring us all one step closer to realising our goal of a whole-of-society approach, where policymakers at the global level can make policy hand in hand with those entities that understand the needs, nuances and idiosyncrasies of providing a service, like urban mobility, in the very streets where people live, work and play.

Transport: A cross-cutting solution to our most pressing challenges

While I am calling for enhanced multi- and cross-sectoral engagement in solving the world's challenges, I will continue to use transport as an example to further showcase why the inclusion of key sectors in global policy making is so crucial.

This begs the question (beyond the engagement of key sectors and the actors that operate within them) - why is transport so central to actually achieving the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, and all the other sustainability frameworks? Since the SDGs are really at the heart of so much of what we are trying to accomplish as a UN community, I will use them as the basis for this analysis.

The organisation for which I work, the SLOCAT Partnership on Sustainable, Low Carbon Transport⁸ has already done a very good job of making the case for *why* transport. Transport and mobility touch on a wide range of SDGs and targets and are essential for their realisation. I have already fleshed out several examples above regarding the important role of public and informal transport providers in helping to fulfil the promise of the sustainable transport community's

⁶ <https://slocat.net/actions-to-enable-walking-cycling-and-public-transport/>

⁷ https://changing-transport.org/publications/10-principles-poster_sut_giz/

⁸ <https://slocat.net/>

Avoid-Shift-Improve framework: **avoid** and reduce the need for motorised travel, **shift** to more sustainable modes and **improve** transport modes.⁹ But when it comes to the specifics of transport impacts on the SDGs, *SLOCAT's Wheel on Transport and SDGs*¹⁰ tells a very clear story:



While the negative externalities created by so much of our existing transport systems are very well known, the positive benefits of *sustainable, low carbon* transport can often be forgotten. It is true that transport is currently the fastest growing fossil fuel intensive sector, thanks to growing transport demand in the Global South especially, responsible for 14% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and 24% of global energy related CO₂ emissions.¹¹ But a closer look at the potential of sustainable transport and mobility systems paints an entirely different picture. Sustainable transport can truly be transformative, bringing about an evolution of how we move people and goods, and be a catalyst for societies that are more healthy, green, resilient and equitable.

For this reason, a fresh cross-cutting approach is needed, ensuring that other sectors are being brought into the many intergovernmental processes upon which we are hedging the future of the planet - from those very same transport providers described above, to energy utilities and stakeholders who work on buildings.

⁹ <https://slocat.net/asi/>

¹⁰ <https://slocat.net/transport-sdgs/>

¹¹ <https://slocat.net/ndcs/>

We are at a critical juncture, rife with danger, but also with opportunities. While it all may seem like gloom and doom with limited progress on the SDGs, the climate crisis continuing to wreak havoc and geopolitical conflict greatly impacting the effectiveness of multilateralism, there are still reasons to be hopeful. Even now, work is underway to stave off the worst impacts of decades of neoliberal economic dominance, and shifts in power are allowing leaders in the Global South - like Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados - to call for meaningful reform of the global financial system. Examples include (the aforementioned) PM Mottley's *Bridgetown Initiative*,¹² which calls for providing significant financial support to the Global South in the face of the climate crisis, as well as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' call for an *SDG Stimulus*,¹³ to rescue the SDGs and ensure a more just and inclusive global economic order.

In 2023 alone, we will see two critical summits in New York in September: the UN SDG and Climate Ambition Summits, both with the potential to bring the world's focus back on what is truly important, with relevant opportunities for up-and-coming geopolitical actors to show their strength and commitment to a more sustainable and peaceful future. In addition, while the preparations for COP28 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) are proving to be as hectic and complex as they are every year, the convening power of the UAE is certainly unparalleled, providing this Gulf state with a truly important role of bringing a shattered world together to truly accelerate progress on the Paris Agreement (despite its own record on promoting the use of fossil fuels).

These and other attempts to restore sanity in the face of ongoing economic and political chaos, including examples of South-South cooperation, will all feed into the UN Summit of Future¹⁴ in 2024 to hopefully begin to put the world on the right track.

How does this all connect to the multi- and cross-sectoral engagement I elaborated upon above? The answer is simple: for all of these efforts converging in the UN Summit of the Future to truly be successful, we need to move away from business as usual and provide the space for key actors to make their voices heard and access the tangible resources they require to bring about the society-wide transformations we so desperately need. Strong political leadership, coupled with the inclusion of core stakeholders can spark the change that will best allow current and future generations to flourish on a thriving planet.

¹² <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2023/04/press-release-with-clock-ticking-for-the-sdgs-un-chief-and-barbados-prime-minister-call-for-urgent-action-to-transform-broken-global-financial-system/>

¹³ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/SDG-Stimulus-to-Deliver-Agenda-2030.pdf#:~:text=The%20SDG%20Stimulus%20aims%20to%20offset%20challenging%20market.and%20non-concessional%20finance%20in%20a%20mutually%20reinforcing%20way>

¹⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future#:~:text=The%20Summit%20of%20the%20Future%20is%20a%20once%20in%20a%20while,towards%20a%20reinvigorated%20multilateral%20system>