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Summary: **SDG Workshop - Challenges for Life Sciences Universities**

In 2015, the United Nations adopted a set of seventeen goals as part of a new sustainable development agenda, the so-called Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Until 2030, this vision has as noble ambitions as ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity for all; but how can we work together towards achieving the goals? Each and every one of us is urged to take action, be it in our diverse professional functions as workers, government heads, health practitioners, or any other, or in our private lives. The pressing question is how we can all work together towards implementing this agenda that carries an ambitious vision for true transformation of our societies.

As universities, we have a triple role, in the research we do, the training we provide, and the links we forge with civil society and politics through third mission and outreach activities. With their broad spectra of expertise, the life sciences universities are especially called upon to contribute to reaching the SDGs in manifold ways. The aims of this workshop were (i) to discuss the specific contribution of life sciences universities to reaching the SDGs through integrating socio-economic, ecological and technical aspects of land use and food chains, (ii) to offer a platform for sharing best practice examples, and (iii) to sketch a way forward to fulfill the universities' responsibilities as information brokers into societal and political dialogue.

Workshop topics

- SDGs as a societal and political mission for life sciences universities
- SDGs as mission in education for sustainable development
- SDGs as mission in research – addressing contradictions, identifying knowledge gaps and pathways to sustainability

WE NEED A TRANSFORMATION

The SDGs cover a wide range of topics: they address social, environmental and economic challenges. The SDGs and the vision they embody are complex. Addressing the SDGs, said Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and Nigeria's former Minister of Environment, **Amina J. Mohammed**, in her video message, will require a transformation of how societies function, and of how we interact with our planet.

Mohammed referred to universities' critical role in research, innovation and leadership, and emphasized the need for inclusive quality education, as well

Global Challenges Universities Alliance (GCUA)

GCUA started in Sweden as an initiative of several universities with a focus on agricultural research and education in light of global challenges ahead. Co-organized workshops and summer schools for students provide for exchange. GCUA is continuously growing. Full members to date:

- Lincoln University, New Zealand
- Michigan State University, USA
- Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences SLU, Sweden)
- University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
- University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna, Austria
- University of Rwanda, Rwanda
- University of Saskatchewan, Canada
- The National University of Ireland Galway, Ireland



We do not educate the minds of the public as much as we should, said Ylva Hilbur, we should join the public debate instead of writing papers.



CDR head Andreas Melcher led through the first workshop day.

as, lifelong learning opportunities. We are the first generation with the resources to know how to end poverty and forge a sustainable path that leaves no one behind, said Mohammed, let us live up to our potential.

Måns Nilsson, Executive Director of the Stockholm Environment Institute and professor at the Royal Institute of Technology, stressed the integrated, universal and transformative nature of the agenda in his talk. **Ylva Hilbur**, Pro Vice-Chancellor for International Relations at SLU and former Deputy Director General of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, emphasized that cooperation was key in the evolution of complex systems and that the unifying message of the SDGs should be seen from this perspective, too: there is the potential for a new narrative, to be change agents and to build new alliances.

SUPPORTING SOUND POLICY, ENABLING INNOVATION

Speakers and the audience agreed that life sciences universities will be key in providing evidence-based solutions, technologies and innovations to the challenges we face. Research will have to support businesses, as well as dialogue at the science-policy interface to enable us to successfully implement the SDGs.

CHERRY-PICKING OR LOOKING FOR SYNERGIES?

Nilsson also raised some concerns, for example that the SDGs still allow for cherry-picking of most appealing or easy-to-implement goals, or the fact that the SDGs lack a strategic framework for planning. He also presented an approach to map interactions between SDGs, and to interpret how they will influence each other in order to find those SDGs, that contribute to many others. Such information could be valuable when prioritizing which SDGs should be implemented first. Still, one should keep in mind that there is a considerable amount of interpretation needed when interrelating individual SDGs or targets, Nilsson added.

GO LOCAL, KEEP IN MIND GLOBAL, THINK ABOUT TIME

When examined closer, sustainability is not an easy concept, said **Arjen Wals**, UNESCO chair of Transformative Learning for Socio-Ecological Sustainability at Wageningen University and Research, in his talk. How sustainable something is depends largely on where you ask this question and at which time. The time dependency adds difficulty to grasping, researching and teaching what sustainability means and how we can achieve it.

THINK HOLISTIC, GET OUT OF YOUR BOX

There is need for a systemic approach, as was remarked by several speakers, among them **Mary Amuyunzu-Nyamongo**, co-founder of the African Institute for Health and Development, and **Franz Fischler**, former European Union's Commissioner for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries and current president of think tank Forum Alpbach, approaches have to be coherent, multi-sectoral and integrated. We need people who can facilitate the crossing of boundaries, said Arjen Wals. While research and education are classical



Amina J. Mohammed called for a transformation of societies.



The SDGs miss a strategic framework for planning, said Måns Nilsson.



Sabine Baumgartner, vice rector for teaching and continuing education, welcomed the audience.



System thinking is the key, said Franz Fischler, cooperation between disciplines is required.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 goals, the SDGs, to protect the planet and work towards prosperity for all. The vision is "to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (1). Unlike their predecessors the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs apply to all countries world-wide. Until 2030, all need to "mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind" (1). The SDGs comprise 169 targets and are also called the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

distinctions, they might not be as useful if we want to become sustainable, he added.

Note:

With the workshop, we aimed at (1) adopting a position paper of GCUA towards fulfilling the SDGs, (2) developing an agenda for research, teaching and management. An executive summary will be available as soon as the document will have been accepted by the respective GCUA universities' official representatives; the position paper is currently being revised and plans to contribute to the debate in the scientific community.

Further reading and links:

- (1) United Nations, www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/
- (2) Higher Education Sustainability Initiative of the United Nations, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdination/hesi> global platform for sharing work for the SDGs

BOKU and the SDGs

At BOKU Vienna, there has been considerable interest in the SDGs since their inception. In 2016, CDR hosted a **first event** to ask how BOKU could help to implement the SDGs and discuss Austrian efforts. Shortly afterwards, the **SDG working group** formed, bringing together scientists from several fields of expertise at different BOKU departments and institutes.

Since then, the researchers have mapped their expertise to the goals. BOKU scientists have teamed up with several ministries (Education, Science and Research; Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs) to organize events on SDG implementation and services that science can provide to achieve it. BOKU researchers incorporate the SDGs into their **courses**. **Outreach** has been equally important and spans public events for a broad audience and workshops for children at KinderUni, the children's summer university.

Living up to **BOKU's students'** tradition of lively engagement in societal issues, the university's students have been very active in discussing, promoting and critically reflecting upon the SDGs.



Research and policy makers often talk different languages, advised Mary Amuyunzu-Nyamongo for caution.



Critical thinking should be an output of education, said Arjen Wals.



Sound research on the SDGs needs a budget, reminded Georg Gratzer, politicians must be made aware of this need and also of the benefits.



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