

Eighteenth Meeting of the
United Nations Economist Network (UNEN)

Wednesday, 14 July 2021
8:30 – 10:30 a.m.

Mr. Elliott Harris, Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Chief Economist of the United Nations, introduced the agenda: (i) UNDESA World Social Report 2021: Reconsidering Rural Development; (ii) New Economics for Sustainable Development (NESD); and (iii) Update on Working Groups on Digital Economic Transformation; and Innovative Financing.

UNDESA World Social Report 2021

Mr. Nazrul Islam, Officer-in-Charge, Development Research Branch, EAPD, DESA presented the World Social Report 2021 summarizing the three main messages of the Report. Firstly, poverty is a rural phenomenon and, historically, higher productivity in agriculture and rural development had a preceding role in successful industrialization. Therefore, rural development needs to be at the forefront of attention. Secondly, time has come to end the rural-urban divide through the rapid spread of new technologies that enable *in situ* urbanization and a broader role for rural development. Thirdly, sustainable rural development is also important for high-income countries with industrialized agriculture because current rural development has led to considerable degradation of the natural capital and the rise of zoonotic diseases, including COVID-19.

The Report notes that the new technologies can reduce the input requirements of agriculture, saving land, water, and help promote organic and mixed farming, and can facilitate leapfrogging e.g., the use of cell phones instead of land phones. Countries would have to make a Big-Push by investing in physical and social infrastructure or undertake critical investment in strategic areas according to countries specific circumstances, which could trigger processes with wider impact. Finally, the WSR 2021 highlights how smallholder agriculture can be conducive to achieving various objectives of social and environmental sustainability.

In the discussion, Mr. Harris underscored the role of digital technologies in rural development, referring also to the UNEN work on digital economic transformation. Mr. Clark (FAO) referred to the FAO 2021 report and the importance of food agricultural systems and their impact on several SDGs as well as the interconnections among the SDG targets. He also warned about the emphasis on higher agricultural productivity with negative environmental impacts. Mr. Jacob added that the current task is how to take the Report's main messages to the operational level and affect positively the lives of rural populations. Mr. Asad recalled the importance of ecosystems in agriculture and the fact that national development planning often has an urban-rural bias. Participants discussed the importance of technology through more concerted and well-directed rural development efforts and bringing development to rural communities, rather than mainly focusing on urban settings. It is important to take this forward in the UN's development work on the ground.

New Economics for Sustainable Development

The eight Working Groups provided updates on their discussions and engagements regarding the preparation of the zero drafts of Policy Briefs pertaining to the main areas of the working groups.

Blue Economy Working Group: The focus of the Policy Brief is being discussed, trying to not dive deep into the complex subjects of the Blue Economy but focus on the added value from a human and natural capital perspectives. Thus, the Brief would open a policy avenue to help communities to fully participate in the economic development process, where industries would also operate and contribute.

The Green Economy Working Group: It has yet to convene a general meeting of its members to continue the discussion in order to formulate a zero draft.

Purple/Care Economy Working Group: One meeting was held in order to define the approach for the Policy Brief and a Google Doc link has been created for everyone to contribute to the process. The Brief will not only focus on care but, in particular, on the role of women and gender in a broad spectrum. Mr. Harris advised to reach out to UN Women and find out whether they would like to contribute.

Mr. Harris referred to relevant work of the International Resource Panel on the energy transition as well as on resource use from a circularity lense.

Innovative Financing

Mr. Harris informed that there are three work streams in progress: inventory of types of Innovative Finance; policy and institutional issues; and analysis of