

From Science to Practice

Strengthening Research Uptake to Achieve the SDGs

A VIEW FROM INTERNATIONAL GENEVA

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Acknowledgements

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Significant substantive and organizational efforts were made by the organizing committee—individuals from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) and its Global Governance Centre, Think Tank Hub Geneva, the Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI), the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the UN Library Geneva, the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Switzerland (SDSN) and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)—to ensure the smooth running of the conference.

The conference would not have been possible without the generous financial support provided by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, as well as the rooms and infrastructure provided by the World Meteorological Organization.

Finally, the conference built on earlier initiatives of the United Nations University and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies' Programme for the Study of International Governance, co-organizers of the 2016 "Strengthening the UN's Research Uptake" conference, as well as the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System, whose engagement on the topic of science-policy interaction paved the way for these discussions.

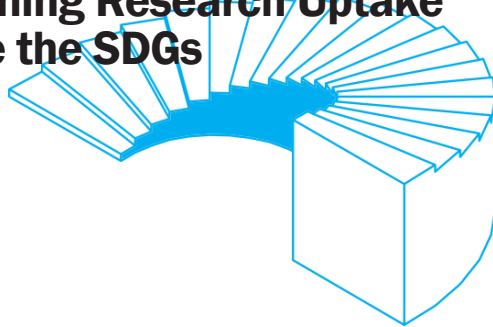
This report was drafted by Maggie Carter, rapporteur of the conference, and designed by Sergio Sandoval.

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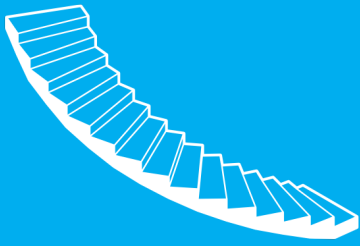
Strengthening Research Uptake to Achieve the SDGs



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In the face of compounding global challenges and the pressing and ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the need for evidence-based policy making informed by rigorous scientific research has never been greater. It is in this context that a consortium of research institutes, think tanks, governmental bodies and international organizations committed to strengthening International Geneva convened a two-day conference to explore the possibilities for improving research uptake in policy and decision making in the UN system. Drawing on Geneva's rich landscape of research and policy institutions, the conference brought together key actors in a collaborative format to discuss the barriers to research uptake and identify possible pathways to a transformed science-policy interface.



THE WORLD IS AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE. The gap between the rich and the rest is growing as wealth concentrates at staggering rates in the hands of the few, draining public resources for social development. Conflict, natural disasters and economic instability are reshaping our cities and communities, which are struggling to find a balance between inclusion, growth and sustainability. At the same time, climate change threatens the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat, degrading our quality of life, health and well-being. Recognizing the immediacy of these issues and the many other challenges that our planet faces, as well as the need to address them through an integrated approach, 193 countries adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, which sets 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This ambitious effort to build a better world and “leave no one behind” seeks to tackle global challenges through a global partnership for action that recognizes these challenges as deeply interconnected.

While this task is a daunting one, fortunately there is an abundance of knowledge available to help solve many of these issues. The field of scientific research continues to expand, methodologies for data collection grow increasingly sophisticated with each passing year, and each discovery builds on previous ones, presenting a vast landscape of knowledge that could be harnessed to help address pressing global challenges. However, translating that knowledge into action remains a complicated task. Research often fails to find its way into policy-making circles due to a number of technical, normative, cultural, political, institutional and financial barriers. Add to that a growing public distrust of science spurred by “post-truth” politics and populist movements, and the prospects for successful research uptake seem bleak.

For this reason, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) and its Global

Governance Centre, Think Tank Hub Geneva, the Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI), the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the UN Library Geneva, the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) joined together to convene a two-day conference, “From Science to Practice: Strengthening Research Uptake to Achieve the SDGs,” on 11–12 December 2019. Held on the premises of the World Meteorological Organization in Geneva, the conference set out to identify gaps and needs in the area of research uptake, and to brainstorm ways to develop new and strengthen existing interactions between the worlds of science and policy. On Day 1, two distinguished panels discussed the value and potential of scientific research to influence policy, laid out challenges to bridging the divide between the two, and provided insights as to how these challenges might be overcome. During parallel breakout sessions, participants discussed these issues thematically across three SDGs—Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being; Goal 10: Reducing Inequalities; and Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities—and how research can be better harnessed to achieve them. On Day 2, the Think Tank Hub brought together students and experts in an innovative workshop, based on a design thinking approach, to brainstorm solutions to some key challenges to research uptake that were identified during Day 1.

Beyond its primary objective of discussing paths for bridging the research-policy divide, the conference itself served as a bridge, bringing together around 80 researchers and policy makers to build networks and facilitate new avenues of communication and collaboration. Representatives from 34 academic institutions, think tanks, research institutes, NGOs, United Nations agencies and international organizations took part in the conference.

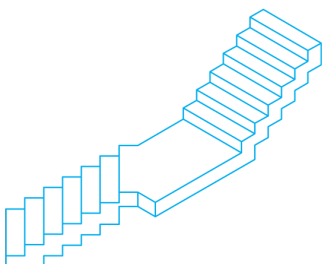
Barriers to Research Uptake: Gaps and Needs





Time has become a compressing factor in terms of global problem solving.

Francesco Pisano
Director, United Nations Library Geneva



WHAT EXACTLY DOES THE SCIENTIFIC community have to offer the policy-making community, and vice versa, and what role should science play in achieving the SDGs? This very question provided the problematique for the conference and sparked debate in its opening session. While many calls for “evidence-based policy making” and “science-policy interaction” have been made by researchers and practitioners alike, Professor of International Relations and Political Science Annabelle Littoz-Monnet warned against attributing absolute objectivity to scientific research. Challenging “rationalist assumptions,” she argued instead that “academic knowledge is itself not always objective; it is not immune to interests, norms, identities, power relationships, political and social realities.” However, she asserted, scientific knowledge can nevertheless inform policy and public debate, and be valued for different reasons,

namely its ability to reveal alternative ways of seeing problems, harness a broad range of methodological tools, maintain relative autonomy, and occasionally make paradigm-shifting discoveries that recast the way problems are approached.

The depth of nuance and complexity associated with scientific inquiry may, however, not be suitable for policy makers’ imperatives. Furthermore, as multiple participants and audience members pointed out, it can also lead to the curse of “paralysis through analysis.” Ultimately, as Maurizio Bona, CERN Senior Advisor for Relations with Parliaments and Science Policy, asserted, “complexification” must give way to decision making.

Despite the many valuable contributions science has to offer, the question of how to get from the knowledge produced to effective policy solutions remains. Existing science-policy interfaces have not had great success, as United Nations Office at Geneva Director-General Tatiana Valovaya pointed out in her opening remarks: “The problem is not that we do not have the knowledge. The problem is that sometimes we cannot transform this knowledge ... into practical political measures.” Throughout the course of the conference, participants identified a number of major challenges preventing this transformation of knowledge into practice, which may arise at various stages in policy processes: what knowledge is being produced; how this knowledge reaches policy makers; and finally, what policy makers do with this knowledge.

Aligning science and society?

One strand of discussion centred around the specific ways in which scientific research is conceptualized and conducted, indicating that this is not always conducive to the results-oriented work of policy making. As Paul Ladd, Director of the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), argued, “It’s not enough to just do research. In fact, it’s not even enough to do the best research. You have to think about how that research then engages with people that make decisions about the allocation of resources.” There is often a disconnect between scientists and policy makers. Many argued that for scientific research to have a concrete impact on policy, science needs “transformational changes when it comes to its incentive systems,” as Peter Messerli, Director of the Centre for Development and Environment at the University of Bern, put it, in order to shift focus and align more closely with societal needs and priorities, as opposed to being a purely knowledge-oriented venture. On the other hand, policy makers are often looking for one-off, quick and simple solutions, greatly underestimating the time and resources necessary to collect data thoroughly and responsibly and to develop recommendations. This can lead policy makers to draw “invisible lines” around research, in the words of Paul Ladd, influencing scientific research in terms of the content, approach, location and time frame, among other aspects. With scientists and policy makers operating at two ends of the spectrum, perhaps what is required is a middle ground, bridging the gap between policy makers’ needs for quick solutions to immediate problems and scientists’ focus on the medium to longer term.

One way this disconnect might be reconciled is by conducting research within the United Nations itself; however, as many participants pointed out, this is an uphill battle in the many agencies not specifically dedicated to research. Petru Dumitriu from the UN Joint Inspection Unit laid out several barriers for UN staff to engage in research, including hierarchical protocols and

Whose knowledge for whose progress?

Another challenge relates to the kind of knowledge being produced, and by whom. Many participants noted a lack of diversity in research, in terms of gender, age, geographical location, discipline and academic background, a problem that must be addressed in order to achieve the SDGs. The role of Southern institutions in multilateral decision-making processes in particular came into focus during the two days. While the SDGs are global in focus, much of the work to meet them must focus on developing countries, in line with the 2030 Agenda’s commitment to “leaving no one behind.” However, long-standing hierarchies of knowledge often serve to delegitimize certain kinds of knowledge, for example knowledge produced in the global South that is embedded in distinctly local paradigms and approaches, although there is now some pushback as efforts to decolonize knowledge make progress. UNRISD Senior Research Coordinator Katja Hujó asserted the importance of taking such alternative forms of knowledge into account. Further, there is a troubling imbalance in the quantity of knowledge produced in the global South compared to the global North. As Peter Messerli pointed out, in some parts of the developing world there are on average as few as 70 researchers per 1 million people. As he said, “That means all of Geneva would have about 35 researchers... We cannot expect knowledge-based solutions and pathways to come out of such an unequal distribution of science.”

Beyond these challenges that relate to the production of knowledge itself, many participants focused on the issue of the transmission of that knowledge to policy makers. Scientific research findings very often require translation so that policy makers can both understand and implement them. Even when scientific research is synthesized in a brief or other concise format for a policy-making audience, formal direct processes meant to feed research into the UN system may be lacking, as many

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