

Ninth Meeting of the
United Nations Economists Network (UNEN)

Thursday, 25 June 2020
9:00 – 11:00 a.m.

Mr. Elliott Harris, Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Chief Economist of the United Nations, opened the ninth meeting of UNEN, acknowledging all participants who joined the discussion.

Mr. Harris noted the main objectives of the meeting: (1) update the network on discussions with DCO and Regional Commissions; (2) update on status of thematic briefs; and (3) provide updates on the progress of the chapters and launch plans for the UNEN report for the 75th anniversary of the UN.

Update on the discussion with DCO and the Regional Commissions

Mr. Harris began by briefing the network on his conversations with Robert Piper, ASG of DCO, on how UNEN can contribute and support the country representatives. Mr. Harris clarified that the engagement of UNEN should not interfere with, but rather complement, existing network and relationships between commissions and country teams. The engagement would also be limited by available DESA staff resources. Mr. Harris expects that all country economists would want to participate in this network, sharing their on-the-ground experience with the entire UN system. In this respect it would be useful to build an inventory of the competencies of the participants of the network.

Mr. Harris reported that the discussion was welcomed by Mr. Piper, who noted this engagement should be a global model where economists can discuss topics, exchange views and coordinate work. This network could also serve as a resource to identify expertise as needed on specific issues and to provide quality control over common knowledge products. The network could also be valuable to support the production of CCAs through global and regional expertise. Mr. Piper noted that it would be useful for the network to have regional subgroups.

Mr. Harris also reported on his discussions with representatives for the Regional Commissions. He noted that all Commissions are already heavily engaged with CCA processes and country teams. The contacts are facilitated through the regional DCO and the exchange has been useful to help mobilize consultants and direct inputs for policy response, for example. The ad hoc nature of the requests has been a challenge. There is an expected demand of about 30 CCAs each year. This may require specific TORs to be drafted for engagement modalities, including defining the role of the global network and how to interface with regional commissions.

The discussion was centered on how to add value to the numerous processes that exist to support country teams (CCAs, policy advice, technical assistance). Participants also noted the network could add value by addressing issues that are contentious and systemic (debt, others) and that are of common concern. A system wide position would be of great help. The basic recommendation from the participants was to remain modest in ambition and to discuss with agencies to

determine level of engagement needed. It was asked that each Regional Commission prepare a short list of existing engagement to circulate to UNEN and inform the discussion.

Update on the status of the thematic briefs

Mr. Harris opened the discussion by asking what the role of the thematic briefs should be. One possibility is to focus on issues of great importance for the time, pulling together collective expertise on issue-based analysis. Rather than just informing the discussion, the briefs would have a central goal of providing policy recommendations. He noted that the audience for these briefs is diverse, including country teams and UN agencies that work on policy formulations and would look to understand institutional perspectives from other parts of the UN. The UN perspective should feature prominently in these briefs.

The UNEN was asked for inputs on what criteria should be used to identify future topics, and how they could benefit from the recent work on COVID-19. Practical questions on publishing and publicizing these briefs also need to be considered. It was suggested that no more than 2 briefs should be published within every 6 months, and the modus operandi for the production of each thematic brief should be largely left for the team working on it to decide. Mr. Harris called for creative and proactive effort by UNEN members to publicize the briefs. It was argued that the briefs can respond to specific requests, but that the UNEN should be opportunistic, looking to inform upcoming events and discussions. The briefs should be used as a platform to provide the UN's perspective on important issues.

The network shared updates on the thematic briefs on debt, Global Green New Deal, beyond GDP, and nature-based solutions. All are on advanced stages of preparation, but are challenged by the rapidly changing global situation. Mr. Harris noted that the briefs should make a forceful case to avoid just returning to business as usual and instead push a message of reimagining and reinventing. He also urged the briefs on debt and the Global Green New Deal to be finalized and launched as soon as possible.

Update on progress of the UN's 75th anniversary report

Mr. Harris provided an update on the status of the publication, noting that all chapters have been peer-reviewed and the "core team"

pre-launches where teasers are shared with the public with the goal of preparing journalists for the analysis that will be presented in the report. Mr. Harris invited UNCTAD to discuss communications strategy with DESA team and plan media strategy. It was also suggested if the UNCTAD Secretary-General Mr. Kituyi could participate in the launch event for the report. Other prominent figures suggested by the group that could possibly be invited to the launch event include Prof. Nicholas Stern and Prof. Joseph Stiglitz.

Mr. Harris also noted the importance of high quality graphical presentation of the work, and the possibility of making the online document interactive. This will be discussed in more detail in July, including ideas for staff members and other resources that can contribute to the effort.

Conclusion

Mr. Harris concluded the meeting by summarizing the tasks for the network and thanked all the participants for their contributions up to now and commitments for continuing the work.