

Sixth Meeting of the
United Nations Economists Network (UNEN)

Tuesday 10 March 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 meeting of the UNEN, acknowledging all participants who joined the discussion.

Mr. Harris noted the two main objectives of the meeting: (1) discuss key issues for operationalizing the UNEN Roster of Experts (2) provide updates on the progress of the chapters of the UNEN report for the 75th anniversary of the UN.

UNEN Roster of Experts

Mr. Harris opened the discussion by noting the roles that the UNEN can be expected to play, illustrated by his two recent experiences in Malaysia and Uganda interacting with Member States and UN country teams (UNCT) on the ground. The experiences highlight that there is substantial demand from Member States and the UNCT for UN's global perspective on key megatrends and the economic analyses that different UN economic apparatus can provide. There is also strong interest to work with different UN agencies on sector-specific issues.

Mr. Harris noted that identifying the UNEN roster of experts would require mapping out the area of expertise of UN entities. It would also depend on the extent of the Common Country Analysis (CCA), which could cover specific issues that could go beyond the internal expertise of the UN. Economic analytical support from the UNEN would likely be first piloted in a few countries, before being fully rolled out. He noted that ECLAC had proposed mapping out regional expertise, covering a range of issues, from human mobility to equitable growth, and from climate change to crime and violence. Mr. Harris asked the group to carefully contemplate whether if the roster of experts can truly help UN economists on the ground, including if it can guarantee to provide relevant expertise within a reasonable timeframe and how it can complement other substantive support that the UN is providing to UNCTs, including that from the Development Coordination Office (DCO).

ECLAC noted that the UNEN roster of experts would be a good thing, but it is important to think about its ability to deliver. Both ECLAC and ECA stressed that building rosters from regional expertise is important, as sound analytical support for a country would require knowing its specific characteristics combined with economic knowledge and global and regional experiences. It is also important to ensure there is a balance between different areas of knowledge, which allows the roster to provide concrete answers to concrete questions. ECLAC noted two challenges in operationalizing the roster: (1) how to build rosters of different expertise into one database and (2) how to communicate the questions to the roster of experts. ECA suggested the UNEN to take an issue-based coalition approach.

DESA/EAPD noted that UNEN can take the role of translating global ideas into local action while complementing other networks such as the DCO network. While the DCO network could be dealing with the major macroeconomic items, UNEN can deal with more comprehensive and interlinked issues, assessing how one policy action affects a whole range of development issues. UNEN can also provide a perspective of how development in a region affect others, and of how lessons from a region can be relevant for others.

UNEN report for the UN 75th anniversary

The chapter leads reported to the group on the progress of the chapters of the UNEN report of the UN 75th anniversary.

Regarding chapter 1, the lead author requested that each working group submit of approximately 1,500 words by 20 March that can be used to draft the introduction.

There was no update on the progress of chapter 2 on climate change

Regarding chapter 3 on emerging technologies, it was reported there would be a full chapter draft by Thursday following the meeting. The chapter lead noted there were many comments, and most were in the form of references, which would take time to be integrated into the text. Some substantive challenges in preparing the chapter include the need to strike a balance between specificity and generality in the discussions and to establish linkages with other chapters. Harris note the importance of explaining the linkages in a way that readers who are not technology experts can also understand.

Regarding chapter 4 on demographic trends, the chapter leads noted that a preliminary draft was prepared. There was a need to elaborate more on the interlinkages between demographic trends and other megatrends. It was noted that the text would need more policy examples. Harris also pointed out that the chapter's statement that urbanization was contributing to population growth slowdown was a serious claim and needed to be highlighted. Mr. Harris pointed out that the chapter's discussion on shaping megatrends is very intriguing and asked where the UN come in to shape policy interventions.

Regarding chapter 5 on inequality, the chapter leads noted that the chapter discussed inequalities' impacts, drivers, links with other megatrends, winners and losers of globalization trends, and how to reduce inequality, among others. There was a need to trim down the text and one option was to focus on inequality of access to opportunities and what it means for subsequent opportunities. However, focusing on inequality of opportunities would leave out some important issues on shaping the future. Harris also pointed out that the chapter's discussion on shaping megatrends is very intriguing and asked where the UN come in to shape policy interventions.

Regarding chapter 6 on urbanization, it was noted that the chapter is following the outline as