

ACCELERATION TOWARDS THE SDGs

EXPERT GROUP CONSULTATION REPORT:

**How can we accelerate the
transformations needed for achieving the
Sustainable Development Goals?**



Asia-Pacific
SDG Partnership

Abstract:

This report captures the main findings of the online consultation on the theme of acceleration conducted by ESCAP as part of the SDG Partnership Report. The consultation convened sixteen experts to discuss the main drivers of acceleration towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

It helped identify six drivers of acceleration: regulation, innovation, incubation, incentives, platforms and investment. In the following report, we explain each of these drivers based on the participants' stories.

I. Introduction:

What?

On October 11, 2019 ESCAP ran its first ever fully online consultation with the facilitation support of InsightPact. This consultation — a project part of the larger yearly Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) partnership report — aimed at gaining direct insights into the process of acceleration towards the SDG.


Where?

Participants joined the consultation on Zoom, a digital video conference platform from their homes and workplaces. This enabled bringing together participants from urban and rural areas; from Asia, Europe and North America. ESCAP chose to convene participants on this platform to “walk the talk” of the SDGs. Online consultations of this kind are a concrete solution to cut down greenhouse gas emissions associated with traveling, and to reach out to the furthest away, making sure no one is left behind.

Who?

For this consultation, we were joined by 16 experts from a large variety of horizons. The group's collective expertise included organic agriculture, climate change, social entrepreneurship, high technology, innovation and development.

In each of their fields, the experts chosen for this consultation have had an outstanding record for igniting and facilitating positive change. But they operate in silos that often do not communicate. By bringing this unusual group together, the goal of UN ESCAP was to crack acceleration. Enabling a dialogue between fields would help reveal common threads driving change, aside from the differences of specific topics.



Prior to the consultation, participants were asked to fill out a form that would prime them for the conversation. They were asked:

- “Could you share one good example of rapid progress in any development area (e.g. health, education, governance, environment)? What is the evidence for rapid progress?”
- What were some of the drivers of the rapid progress?
- What challenges and bottlenecks were overcome in these examples ?
- With the advancements in technologies, new ways of financing, new data sources etc., are there other emerging drivers that can help accelerate progress in different SDG areas (e.g social, political, economic, governance, environmental issues)?”

Thanks to this form, all participants arrived with clear examples of acceleration to share with each other.

How?

The consultation was split into three main segments:

Plenary Session #1 - First, all participants were introduced to the consultation in a plenary session. During this phase, the format and the context of this consultation were explained by the InsightPact and ESCAP team respectively. A few participants were then able to briefly share their example of acceleration.

Break Out Groups - Second, participants were split in three breakout rooms. There, they were invited to share their examples for acceleration. Splitting into subgroups would give ample time for participants to explain their examples and exchange with each other.

Plenary Session #2 - Third, participants were brought back to the plenary session. In this last segment, the objective was for the learnings of all three groups to converge into actionable lessons. To spread the successes highlighted by their examples, participants were asked to confront questions of replicability and dissect the mechanics of success.



**“Social enterprises
are redistributive pathways
for the wealth generated by
communities.”**

**"We need strong policies.
Lukewarm policies aren't
sufficient to trigger
development."**

II. Findings

Through the exchanges had during the consultation, we identified six drivers of acceleration. Changemakers, especially public officials can steer change through **regulation (1)** — that is, altering behaviors by changing the “rules of the game” in which individuals operate. Adjacent to these rules are the tools with which the game is played. **Innovation (2)** is a process through which public and private actors can improve these tools. By delivering new methods and technologies, innovation set people up to do more with less and find new sources of value.


For the new rules and tools to successfully generate acceleration, it is equally important to equip the players. This is why **incubation (3)** is so important. The human flourishing needed to meet the SDGs can be actively supported through training and educational initiatives. Furthermore, equipped individuals need resources to become agents of a sustainable transition themselves. Empowering people to become changemakers can be achieved by shaping **incentives (4)** that nudge individuals towards positive change and by creating platforms to access and exchange **information (5)**. Lastly, the changemakers of tomorrow sometimes miss a financial push to create momentum of themselves. This is why investing **(6)** in them is the spark they need to trigger acceleration.

In the following section, we dive into and dissect each of the six drivers of acceleration that arose from the consultation.

1. Regulate

Two participants pointed at China’s exceptional regulatory feats. As they reminded us, the country recently experienced an unrivaled economic development, captured not only by a booming GDP per capita, but also by the quick development of transport infrastructure and the deployment of the internet. In parallel, China was able to record remarkable successes in the area of forest conservation. Between 1990 and 2015, forest cover went up from 16% to 22%.

According to both participants, these successes speak in part to China’s ability to adopt comprehensive regulatory measures and to enforce them strictly. China’s thriving infrastructure network, exemplified also by the Belt and Road initiative, is funded largely thanks to the government’s stronghold over property price. Regulations over land use and ownership have enabled the economic acceleration of the country. Likewise, its successful reforestation campaigns can be partially attributed to tight regulations on grazing and logging, which have halted the overexploitation of forest areas.



In these cases, the strong signal emitted by the government was faithfully echoed by radical improvements in China's prosperity and environmental management.

Regulation works best when it is the result of a back-and-forth between stakeholders and *policymakers*.

2. Innovate

Innovation is another direct action to fuel acceleration. One participant brought up an example of how technological innovation can shape sustainable and abundant societies by helping extract value from waste.

In Asia, where many societies cultivate rice, rice husk is considered waste. As the participant explained, it is so worthless that Malaysian rice farmers typically burn the husk in order to dispose of it. But while rice husk had long been perceived as a burden by rice farmers, a technology that turns it into food packaging has shifted their understanding of it. Thanks to this technological innovation and a network that enables rice producers to sell the husk directly to packaging companies, rice husk has become a source of additional income.

Among other things, finding new value in rice crops was made possible by private-sector innovation, which identified the tremendous profit opportunity in rice waste. As other participants shared, the creative problem-solving captured by this example is to be found across sectors. For instance, policymaking increasingly builds upon experimental methods to quickly deliver solutions aligned with people's needs. Given the central role of government in society, putting an even greater emphasis on innovation within government work could have ripples throughout the entire ecosystem.

3. *Incubate*

“Social enterprises are redistributive pathways for the wealth generated by communities”

Incubation is amplifying someone’s capabilities by teaching them the skills they need to succeed. During our consultation, it was the most cited driver of acceleration, as four of the participants made it the centerpiece of their example.

These examples reflected the diversity in who can be incubated (the youth, entrepreneurs), and what they can be taught (from traditional to digital technologies).


One of our participants emphasized the importance of equipping the youth with adequate skills. As we recognize the power of impact entrepreneurship, we can shape the workforce of tomorrow by training the youth to become entrepreneurs themselves. This demands understanding the requirements of the labor market, so as to better align education and work. In particular, for training to result in employment the governments need to anticipate their populations’ needs better.

A second participant contrasted this position by presenting a way for the government to share the responsibility of incubation. In his example, the government partnered with startups to teach children to code. Before his organization got involved, coding required being able to afford expensive university fees. However, by partnering with startups they were able to cut down on tuition fees by training teachers directly.

Their initiative was extremely successful, with children gaining such high computer command that they would win awards.

The participant credited this success to a very fruitful cooperation between public and private sector. Public school teachers were supportive, and received the financial backing of the government. Meanwhile, startups were able to step in to provide training for a very competitive price.

While coding epitomizes employable skills, a third participant explained how traditional technologies can also bring outstanding value to those who master them. This participant’s organization trains individuals in one of the most deprived areas of the Philippines. They believe vocational training can lift people out of poverty through job creation.



But vocational training means to them casting a broad net, notably by reviving traditional craftsmanship. Some of the successful companies rely on men adopting ancient crafts such as weaving techniques that were traditionally only done by women. By extending this expertise to men, the organization has effectively doubled the pool of potential artisans, making households in the region far more resilient.


A central objective of incubation is to provide individuals with agency. And while the previous participants had focused on professional development as the metric for success, have more agency can mean building community bonds, a fourth participant explained. In her organization, this participant helps young people start their companies, with the hope that their ideas get off the ground and their plans receive funding. While evolving in a very quantitative field, she conceives of her impact in qualitative terms too. One reward she gets from supporting these youth is see them grow more confident when presenting their businesses to investors. It is also to see them attract new team members and create communities around the projects they carry.

4. Incentivize

“Social enterprises and small enterprises want to drive the transformation process, but this cannot happen if the limits are structural”


Another indirect channel to accelerate positive change is incentives; that is, the set of rules or mechanisms to encourage desirable and deter undesirable behaviors. For two of the participants, incentives are the key lever through which governments can accelerate the decarbonization of economies. Phasing out coal from our energy grids or phasing out thermic vehicles from our roads can only be achieved by making the alternatives more affordable. Tools such as finance and price regulation can help nudge individuals towards sustainable technologies. As one of the participants pointed out, Norway is quickly transitioning towards electric and bicycle mobility. This fast shift to clean transportation is driven largely by policies lowering the costs of electric vehicles.

States can shape environments that are more or less conducive to sustainable behaviors, but also decisions like starting a company. A third participant, who has had years of experience with the startup ecosystem in South East Asia described Singapore as a magnet for innovation and entrepreneurship. Between 2003 and 2016, the number of startups doubled from 22,000 to 43,000, becoming the main sandbox for startups and inventors in the region. The cause for the exceptional climate of creativity and thriving entrepreneurship? According to her, it was the product of a mix of financial incentives and technological support coupled with a strong connection between policymakers and entrepreneurs.



"Be mindful of the resources you need for something to work successfully. Will and commitment aren't enough."

"To succeed we keep pushing for new collaborations."



The government also made sure to share the risks with investors. Venture capitalists were given attractive incentives that shared the risks of investing in Singapore with the government.

Policymakers can create incentives to help companies thrive, but companies too can help shape environments conducive to entrepreneurship. As another participant pointed out, the development of social impact companies could be greatly accelerated by welcoming business ecosystems. In the Philippines, support from small and medium enterprises was integral to the success of social businesses.

Lastly incubation can extend beyond businesses. As a key to positive change, community leaders and activists can also gain from training and education. Equipping concerned citizens with the tools to organize and communicate their cause can allow pressing issues to graduate from campaigns to social movements.

5. Provide a platform


“The idea of best practices is that they are not just examples but actually generate momentum for transformation”

Aside from incentives, changing people’s environments to enable action can be achieved by creating platforms. One participant raised the transformational power of knowledge platforms through her experience spreading best agricultural practices.

While the current environmental challenges demand a transition towards sustainable agricultural practices, access to this knowledge can be limited for small scale farmers in developing countries. Where information is lacking, knowledge platforms can help fill the gaps.

The participant had witnessed platforms be the accelerating force farmers need to control the process of transition and make it their own. She shared the example of how such a platform enabled farmers from the Philippines to start farming coffee. In this case, the resources provided by the platform extended beyond farming. It also empowered the farmers to create their brand and claim control over the entire value chain.

As a second participant pointed out, platforms can emanate from the private and the public sector. In particular, the government holds a nodal status that allows it to connect actors with each other. Given the importance of information circulation, the power to connect individual changemakers should be actively realized.



In Malaysia, a government institution partnered with the education system and teachers to promote innovation. The private sector stepped in, as they were willing to invest their time in supporting investments and the results included spin-off actions by students and teachers.

6. Invest

“To succeed we keep pushing for new collaborations”

Lastly, positive change can be accelerated by directly funneling resources into changemakers. In describing China’s successful reforestation program, the participant insisted on the financial support that the government provided to affected stakeholders. A compensation scheme was put in place to ensure that the farmers who had been prevented from grazing and logging would not incur financial losses. In cases like this one, financial investments are crucial requirements to grant the population’s compliance.

Sometimes, access to capital is key to help stakeholders engineer change. In an example mentioned earlier, the plan to recycle rice husk for food packaging would have been impossible without equipping the farmers adequately.

Similarly, private actors can push progress by investing in social enterprises. One participant’s organization has spearheaded sustainable farming practices in South East Asia by investing time and technical support into neighboring farms. Motivated by the creation of a network of organic farmers, this investment has brought remarkable returns. It resulted in a mainstreaming of organic agriculture through a network which now brings together more than 100 farmers around the country.


The importance of investing in partnerships resonated with several participants. While different spaces call for different types of partnership, pairing with new people and organizations — including “unlikely partners — seems to reliably generate value for stakeholders. For instance, getting citizens to work hand-in-hand with the government on a specific issue can build empathy for the perspective of the other party, with resulting improvements in policy design and political involvement. It is also important to remove cronyism and corruption as a way to build trust and attract people and institutions to investment their time and resources in platforms and partnerships.



III. Conclusion

In two hours, we traveled through a large variety of themes and challenges. From the rice paddies to the business districts, the consultation captured the Asia Pacific region as a colorful fresco of landscapes; by gathering online we were allowed to inspect through very different eyes. The eyes of the policymakers, the entrepreneurs, the community leaders, the academics.. would each catch a different detail from this picture. And yet, despite the diversity of professional fields and geographical areas, all the stories shared seem to converge into six lessons for acceleration. From this conversation, we gathered that acceleration could be propelled by regulation, innovation, incubation, incentives, platforms and investment.

But while this report identified and dissected six drivers for acceleration, we noted that a majority of participants shared solutions that achieved acceleration by enabling others. In particular, actions to incubate and invest emerged as the most commonly cited. Based on this observation, prioritizing further research on incubation and investment may help set us on the path of the 2030 Agenda. We must also recognize that this consultation alone is not enough to draw solid conclusions. More data and metrics for success would be required to clearly establish drivers of acceleration. A two-hour consultation — however productive — can only scratch the surface of this topic. There is therefore an exigency to hear more voices and collect different types of data.



“Social enterprises and small enterprises want to drive the transformation process, but this cannot happen if the limits are structural.”

"Governments need to hire the right people for the right jobs, using the right incentives."