

Multilateral accent

Information of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC
and of the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO

Issue 20/June 2016

Editorial

Geneva, with a long history as a hub for international economic and trade relations, is today among the world's most important centres of international cooperation. It not only hosts the second-largest UN office but also more than 30 international organisations, diplomatic representations of almost all countries, and at least 250 non-governmental organisations. Approximately half of all Geneva's residents are foreign nationals. Or as Illona Kickbusch, professor at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, puts it in this latest edition of *Multilateral Accent*: "Here, one doesn't speak about the others, the others are here."

Geneva is Switzerland's gate to the world: The diversity of international organisations and actors from various sectors and professional fields represents an almost inexhaustible potential for Switzerland's international commitment. And it uses this potential – to leverage influence in multilateral governing bodies, conduct peace talks, as well as in its economic relations, scientific innovation and other areas.

In terms of its implementation, the wide-ranging, universal 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development falls on fertile soil in Geneva. The necessary actors, specialist skills and platforms are all present in Geneva. But how are they used to make Geneva an international hub for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals? This edition of *Multilateral Accent* provides some initial ideas about this. Enjoy the read!

Michael Gerber
Ambassador, Special Envoy for Global Sustainable Development

Geneva – a multilateral crossroads



The large number of states and organisations represented at the United Nations puts Geneva at the heart of multilateral action. Photo: UN/Jean-Marc Ferré

Switzerland is host to the second United Nations headquarters, where it plays a very active role. In view of the number and diversity of actors with a presence in the city, Geneva represents a unique multilateral testing ground for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

'Creating synergies'. This would be a fitting tagline to describe International Geneva. The UN and the multitude of players which move in its orbit combine to form an exceptional ecosystem within which to take up the challenges posed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Agreed upon by all states in September 2015, achieving the SDGs will rely on these interdependencies as they apply to all countries, affect all sectors and concern all partners. Implementing the SDGs will require approaches that do their level of ambition justice and are capable of rallying forces to serve common aims.

A centre of operations

As the liveliest centre of multilateral diplomacy in the world, Geneva is also the

operational heart of the United Nations. The figures speak for themselves: of the 40 or so intergovernmental and other international bodies based in Switzerland, 33 are to be found in Geneva. Some 250 non-governmental organisations, 174 states, 255 missions, representations and permanent delegations, as well as an academic community that is very active in research into development cooperation issues are also located in International Geneva. Nearby research hubs, such as the Federal Institutes of Technology, as well as one of the world's major financial centres, complete the picture. And it is all located in an area the size of a postage stamp – or almost – which still manages to host 2,400 meetings a year that attract 200,000 delegates from the four corners of the world. These activities are rooted in the

desire to “strengthen the long-term appeal and competitiveness of international Geneva and of Switzerland as a host country,” according to the Federal Council Dispatch of 19 November 2014.

Actors in the principal areas covered by the SDGs are all represented in Geneva: health, humanitarian aid, water, peace and security, not forgetting human rights, with the latter occupying a central position where all of these domains intersect. UN organisations and agencies are already collaborating closely on certain issues. UNAIDS, for example, was created to coordinate the efforts of around ten different UN organisations to combat HIV/AIDS. Meanwhile, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) coordinates the Geneva Environment Network. Many of the issues are cross-cutting, a reality which is recognised by the 2030 Agenda.

Convergence

For the first time, the SDGs place the interdependence of all development actors, i.e. governments, civil society, the private sector, development banks and, of course, the UN at the heart of their achievement. The big question now for the UN, and for its 193 member states, is how exactly the SDGs can be put into practice. In other words, what strategies must be developed to get these actors thinking and, above all, working together?

The economic crisis may offer the perfect opportunity for this process of reflection. After all, necessity is the mother of invention. It may be, for example, that UN or intergovernmental agencies join forces for their fund-raising campaigns, rather than striking out on their own. This would also require them to cooperate on the distribution of these funds, and on their individual and collective priorities. This may be gazing into a crystal ball to some degree, but certain UN actors are looking even further ahead. Why not think about setting up a ‘health hub’, for example, which would bring together all of the actors in the health sector to drive forward three key areas – normative aspects, financing and advocacy – with each actor respecting the others’ particular fields of expertise. This was once proposed by UNAIDS,



to test the waters. “Switzerland was one of the countries that initiated deliberations on this sort of convergence,” explains Nadia Isler, advisor to the Swiss mission to the United Nations in Geneva. “It’s a difficult idea to sell, but a certain number of partners have shown interest, and discussions are ongoing. This sort of exchange, in an informal setting, is possible in Geneva.”

In another example, at the end of 2015 the Graduate Institute in Geneva invited around 60 participants from 25 countries to meet with international organisations and NGOs in Geneva. This resulted in some 200 individuals sharing their views on the role of academic institutions and think tanks in the implementation of the SDGs and good health governance. “Some delegates asked me ‘why Geneva?’,” recounts Iloona Kickbush, director of the Global Health Programme at the Graduate Institute. “I told them that Geneva is not just a city in Switzerland, but an international centre. In Geneva, you don’t talk about the ‘others’, because the ‘others’ are here.”

Avoiding a siloed approach

The 2030 Agenda aims to avoid issues being dealt with in isolation, in which one UN agency takes charge of the activities towards a given goal. Rather, it encourages multi-sectorial approaches. The 2030 Agenda also adds a further challenge: to depart from reliance on UN agencies and interact with other development actors. “The

strategy for women’s, children’s and adolescents’ health, launched in 2015, is a good example of the path we want to take,” comments Alfonso Barragues, Vice-Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The strategy involves more than 100 UN, philanthropic, civil society and private sector entities from 40 countries. “The initiative came from the UN Secretary-General and not from a single agency, and it broadens the debate to include new social and environmental domains.” The aim is to enhance the impact of activities in a tangible way at country level.

Nadia Isler believes that one of the strengths of International Geneva is the positive platform for exchange that it offers. The dynamics fostered by the city are much more conducive to political dialogue than those in New York, where the shadow of the Security Council tends to polarise relations. In addition, Geneva is “closer to real-life implementation work,” and non-governmental organisations are well integrated here. According to Alfonso Barragues, actors such as the World Health Organisation and the Human Rights Council provide useful models for implementing the SDGs on the ground, because they set global standards which then require dialogue at the national level.

Sustainable financing

Benefiting - according to its website - from this “unique ecosystem”, Sustainable Finance Geneva (SFG) was established as a

link between Financial Geneva and International Geneva. This exchange platform brings together approximately 400 members and several thousand followers around the topic of socially responsible investment. "It's an issue that has grown in importance since the turn of the millennium," explains Angela de Wolff, co-founder of SFG. "Traditionally, the UN and the financial sector were two separate worlds, co-existing but not interacting. Little by little, links between them have grown. Investment is becoming a uniting factor in development, especially in connection with the SDGs. Geneva is gaining prominence as a centre of sustainable financing."

As host and member state, Switzerland has every interest in encouraging this environment so as to remain a major hub for sustainable development. According to Nadia Isler, this climate of dialogue enables issues to be examined from new and action-oriented perspectives, and enables discussions to mature before they are taken up



International Geneva has a particularly strong health sector, with a direct impact on the ground. A vaccination campaign in Ethiopia. Photo: DFID

at government level. These conditions are vital in considering how the SDGs should be implemented – a challenge for which no roadmap yet exists.

Three Questions to Michael Møller



Photo: UN/Pierre Albouy

Michael Møller is Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva

1) Did the United Nations in Geneva introduce any new initiatives in view of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

The idea that 'business as usual' has had its day is taking hold, and we have to find a different way of working both within and between the organisations. That's going to take some time. For example, we will be strengthening our partnerships with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and in those countries in which the UN is active. Parliaments will have a greater role to play where the SDGs are concerned. They are the natural link between the people of their countries and the global issues of the 2030 Agenda.

2) What can the United Nations in Geneva do to encourage synergies with other stakeholders?

We must ensure that everyone is on the same page. David Nabarro, Ban Ki-moon's Special Adviser on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, will also have an office here. One of his principle tasks is to work on synergies and on internal and external coordination, especially with NGOs. We have mapped out the relationships between 75 different Geneva-based organisations and the Goals to which they can contribute. This map is everywhere. The next one will cover 250 organisations. It is amazing to see how quickly each one has integrated the SDGs into its activities.

3) It is often said that a special spirit conducive to exchange and negotiation prevails in Geneva. What's your view?

I agree wholeheartedly. By virtue of its history, its reputation, and its general excellence, it is the venue where we bring peace to the table. It has a fabric that has been woven for 150 years now, with organisations drawing strength from one another. Health is a case in point: organisations active in this field are here because all the others are here. Geneva is the only place on the planet with so many UN and non-UN organisations with both the mandate and the means to act to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, as a host country, Switzerland is serious about providing the right conditions and infrastructure to foster this spirit of dialogue.

The water network

For a number of years now, SDC has been examining the issue of water not only as a source of conflict, but also as a factor of peace. When it decided to step up its commitment at the international level, there was only one obvious choice: International Geneva.

For François Münger, the elegant building accommodating the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in Geneva was the perfect location in which to launch the Geneva Water Hub, of which he is director. The idea of creating this centre of excellence on water and peace was borne out of SDC's Global Programme Water Initiatives, the hub being an important element of the FDFA's activities in the field of water and security. "This building houses two major actors on water issues: the World Meteorological Organization and UN Water," Münger emphasises. "What is more, Geneva offers us a unique network of capabilities in the areas that interest us, both within the United Nations and outside of it".

The Geneva Water Hub aims at better understanding and preventing water-related conflicts. The distribution of this vital resource is the root of numerous cross-border tensions. Crisis potential is also rife in the competition for water between different sectors, such as mining and agriculture. According to the World Economic Forum, water has for several years been one of the top three major risk factors for conflict around the world. The Water Hub seeks to develop water-related diplomacy and policy that serve as instruments of peace. It has three components: a think tank, to bring together

relevant skills; an education and knowledge component; and a networking platform bringing together governments, international organisations, UN agencies, the academic community and, in the near future, the private sector.

Bearing all of this in mind, it is hardly necessary to stress the importance of having direct access to some of these resources. "The WMO is a key partner for data on the water cycle, and this data is crucial, especially for fragile countries," François Münger explains. "Our location within its building lends us a certain cachet, but what it gives us above all is access to global experts." The same building is also home to UN Water, the only United Nations mechanism coordinating the water-related activities of around 30 organisations within the UN system and just as many outside partners from other fields. With the Maison de la Paix next door, a number of organisations and foundations specialising in conflict issues and human rights are thus located in close proximity of each other.

François Münger believes that International Geneva offers an exceptional platform for exchange within a contained area. With its Earth and Environmental Sciences Section and its Platform for International Water Law,

the University of Geneva is an important contributor to the Hub. These two domains are jointly examining what constitutes good water governance. The University is also in a position to support the Hub's own work.

To the same end, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) and its work in international relations also offers a source of partnerships. Furthermore, the development of international contacts is made easy by the fact that the UN missions of 174 countries are located nearby. Switzerland has launched a 'High-Level Panel on Water and Peace', whose members currently comprise 40 other countries from around the world. The Water Hub acts as the Panel's secretariat. Concurrently, it is in the process of launching a 'Group of Friends' on water and peace, in the interest of stimulating reflection and capacity-building in these areas.

The Hub's activities are entirely in keeping with the 'Blue Peace' initiative developed five years ago by SDC in collaboration with an Indian think tank, the Mumbai-based Strategic Foresight Group. The objective is essentially the same: to transform water from a source of potential conflict into an instrument of peace. "Still today little attention is paid to the question of water governance. If we ignore it, the related disputes risk undermining efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for water," warns François Münger. "There is not a single structure within the UN System to defuse these conflicts or help to resolve them. It's an extremely sensitive issue, but International Geneva offers a positive environment in which to tackle it."



IMPRINT

Editor: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC
State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO
Editorial collaboration: Michel Bühler
Layout: FDFA Visual Communication
Translation from French: FDFA

Nicole Ruder, Head of Global Institutions Division, SDC
nicole.ruder@eda.admin.ch

Daniel Birchmeier, Head of Multilateral Cooperation, SECO
daniel.birchmeier@seco.admin.ch