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The Coimbra Group Meets the UN
October 2031: Forecasting the Future
Working Session Report

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1. Introduction

The Working Session took place on Friday 22nd October 2021 as part of The Coimbra Group Meets the UN event taking place in partnership with the UN Library & Archives and UNIGE.

Following the scene-setting introduction and recap on the previous day's discussions, the participants engaged throughout the morning in 2 rotations of the table scenarios, rather than the planned 3 rotations. <https://www.unige.ch/rectorat/coimbra-group-meets-un/>

2. Context

The overall futures-thinking scenario was pre-defined for the session.

We were looking back from October 2031, based on the assumption that our actions had enabled us to achieve the trajectory needed for the Very-Low Greenhouse Gas Emissions targets set by the IPCC¹ and in doing so, had enabled us to achieve the UN SDGs.

Our call to action in 2021 to 'bend the curve' over the next 9 years, gave all participants the 'wrapper' - inviting science, research and the international development community to drive systemic change.

Within this wrapper, participants were divided into groups, pre-arranged into Rectors/Vice-Rectors, UN and Impact Investment/Eco-System. Several UN/eco-system attendees cancelled in the last 48-12 hours before the event.

Each table scenario explored a research area: Basic, Applied, Indicators (Data), Interfaces and Organisations/Hubs. Having these distinct areas was designed to stimulate exploration, whether agreement or disagreement. It enabled greater clarity and definition between participants.

Having explored 2 table scenarios, each group then pulled their thinking together into core actions to share back in the Plenary.

3. The Working Session

There was very positive engagement in the room throughout the Working Session, which enabled all participants to explore their shared landscape and intentions to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

All participants were committed to building real solutions. As expected, getting to the October 2031 horizon unearthed gaps, obstacles and opportunities for collaboration on research and on achieving the UN SDGs; as well as integrating perspectives and competencies on sustainability and sustainable development across education.

3.1. Exploring the Gaps

3.1.1. Key Questions

Key questions emerged during the round table discussions from the participants. These questions were not answered definitively during the Working Session.

- ***Believe: Do you believe you that we can achieve the 50% emissions-reduction target, and UN SDGs, by 2030?***

¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/>

These questions prompted participants to reflect themselves about personal and professional motivations, and to understand more deeply the positions of UN Agencies. Additionally, it invited engagement as scientists to ‘back the science’ and in doing so, to act collectively and urgently.

- ***Focus: What do we (Universities/UN/Impact Investment) need from each other?***

There was appetite for this discussion. The Working Session provided a space to ask this question and open it up for further exploration. What emerged strongly was the need to continue bringing stakeholders together from: Universities, UN, Policy-makers, Sustainable Finance/Impact Investment and private sector to build an understanding of the metrics/impact that each of them is working towards.

- ***Urgency: How can the Rectors rapidly unlock the potential within their organisations around youth activation?***

The word ‘activation’ was welcomed by all participants, to describe the engagement of youth in their communities. This opened up the discussion of creating a Coimbra Group-wide MOOC SDG Course platform and how to mobilise young people through supplementary, accredited courses. From a research perspective, it opened up further questions around multi-disciplinary research, and whether research follows funding and/or funding follows research.

- ***Multi-Disciplinary Research: How can we take this approach to solve these sustainability and sustainable development challenges?***

There was discussion about the need to engage researchers in this scenario and to take a ‘curiosity-led research’ approach to ensure transversal and multi-disciplinary exploration. In turn, this opened up the discussion around metrics and what each stakeholder involved in a research project might need to foster understanding of respective priorities. Further questions were raised around whether research follows funding and/or funding follows research.

- ***Engaging Tutors/Lecturers: How can the Rectors fully engage tutors/lecturers within their organisations to recognise how their courses/course content solving sustainability and sustainable development challenges?***

This was raised as an area for further exploration, in the context of mobilising whole University communities to recognise the value of their role and contribution towards equitable futures.

3.1.2. Key Obstacles

The following elements were raised during the round-table discussions.

- **Political Will:** This was explored in the context of current policy-makers not having the political will to take action on sustainability or sustainable development to achieve the October 2031 scenario.
- **Trust:** The idea of ‘trust’ was raised repeatedly and used in a variety of contexts. Being trusted by policy-makers and other external stakeholders, as well as trusting each other as Rectors individually and as members of the Coimbra Group; and being trusted by internal stakeholders such as researchers, lecturers, students and local communities. The purpose of being trusted was to create momentum towards achieving the UN SDGs and climate action goals.

- **Recognition:** There was a real call from the Rectors, which was reinforced during Anna Panagopoulou's talk, about being recognised and heard at a senior level within the EU as credible and powerful voices, who are able to harness the potential of whole communities.
- **Demands for rapid research:** Paul Ladd, Director of UNRISD talked about his multi-disciplinary research team and how demands for rapid research had increased. This was creating challenges around funding for long-term gold standard research and ensuring that this retained its place in the spectrum of research provision.
- **Research Funding:** The conditions of research funding, as well as the themes of this funding, need further alignment with sustainability and sustainable development objectives.

3.1.3. Key Opportunities

Participants were positive that collaboration would enable key opportunities to evolve, inspire and engage communities and break down bureaucratic and behavioural silos. These included:

- Build on existing science and research collaborations.
- Continuing talking in order to develop new science and research collaborations.
- Have more 'University in the Community' in order to create engagement between the university community and the citizens around the university for collective action.
- Youth Voices: Engage and build competencies of young people in sustainable and sustainable development through MOOCs and other activities.
- Key Indicators: Collect and publish key indicators to facilitate understanding and action about taking action for sustainability and sustainable development.
- Cross-Cultural Communication messages: Create global-reaching, cross-cultural messages, backed by science and research, to engage communities in innovation on sustainability and sustainable development.
- Information Credibility: Using science to create an Information Credibility Index to challenge fake news and misappropriation of research.