

# EO for Evidence-based Policymaking Discussed at WEF 2019



Back in 2016, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report highlighted the top ten risks facing our planet in terms of likelihood and impact. Included in those risks were the failure to act on climate mitigation and adaptation, extreme weather events, water and food crises, as well as biodiversity loss and

ecosystem breakdown. Fast forward to 2019 and the same topics are just as prevalent in [this year's Global Risks Report](#), if not more so, writes Steven Ramage. He spoke at the recent [Blockchain + AI + Human Summit](#) – a side event of the [World Economic Forum \(WEF\) Annual Meeting 2019](#) in Davos, Switzerland – on how Earth observation (EO) supplements and supports (or contests) existing approaches to reporting and monitoring sustainable development.

My talk at the [Blockchain + AI + Human Summit](#) was about how Earth observations can provide insights that inform evidence-based policymaking and decision-making, visually and over time to supplement and support (or contest) existing statistical or tabular approaches to reporting and monitoring sustainable development.

## Distributed ledger technology

My talk was about the value that can be achieved through distributed ledger technology and machine learning in the field of Earth observations. But like every technology advance, these are the enablers rather than the goals. The issues we are facing are still around the lack of data and institutional strengthening. For example, it's my understanding that 93 of the (230+) SDG indicators are related to environmental topics; however, only 34 of those indicators already have established methodologies and data available from UN member states to support reporting and monitoring. Hopefully much more detailed information on this will be made available in UN Environment's 6th Global Environmental Outlook Report in March 2019. Similar themes were reflected upon in the sustainability panel I was on, as well as additional side events held alongside the Annual Meeting. These included a session organized by Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth and the Rockefeller Foundation on their [new "Data Science for Social Impact" fund](#) and the interactive session by SDSN TRENDIS and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data in the Goal 17 Partnerships venue.

## Sustainable development and policymaking

Otherwise, I didn't hear much talk at the Summit on sustainable development, and I certainly didn't hear anything about Earth observations. This wasn't surprising given the focus was on blockchain and artificial intelligence (AI). However, depending on how you define sustainable development, it could be argued that many of the discussions addressed topics that expert practitioners would say fall under sustainable development, although they weren't called out as such during the sessions. David Attenborough's speech about the Garden of Eden made quite an impact (and hopefully causes people to act), and Al Gore's speech about the amount of plastic in the ocean was incredibly powerful.

In the sessions I attended I didn't hear much on policymaking, either, despite much talk about governance and impact. There was a huge amount of discussion around blockchain and AI in these realms, as well as the obvious discussions around global finance and economics.

Globalisation 4.0 was also dominant in the discussions—great to see as GEO has been working on this approach for many years, and our new Secretariat Director has come in with a vision to increase our actions around the digital economy.

In terms of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, I would have liked to see a Fourth Industrial Policy concept (see [Shaping the Fourth Industrial Revolution](#)) to ensure policymaking is forward-looking and keeps up with technology.

Again, I am really not sure that sustainable development was thoroughly addressed (or even intended to be), but in terms of data and the broader impact on humans, this absolutely was discussed. Professor Alex (Sandy) Pentland, one of the main organisers of the Blockchain + AI + Human summit, has written extensively on this topic, and yes, there were even a few of his books available! There was certainly a lot of talk about innovation and some of the ethical, moral, privacy, and security issues around the topics, and maybe some of it translates quite readily into sustainable development.

□ Steven Ramage at the Blockchain + AI + Human Summit 2019 in Davos, Switzerland. (Source: John Werner)

## Influential people, informal settings

At a lunch hosted by one of the many multinational organisations attending Davos, I also raised the issue that the focus seemed to rest on well-developed economies, and that the majority of people and countries that require help around sustainable development topics were not present. I encouraged the assembled group of leaders to consider the developing countries or those labelled as low- and middle-income.

While I didn't find I learned much about any new topics, what I enjoyed most at Davos was the opportunity to speak with incredibly influential people in informal settings. This has probably been written about extensively by WEF veterans, but since it was my first time I was quite impressed by the senior level of attendees. For example, just before I jointly hosted a session on [Digital Earth Africa](#) with a colleague from WEF, I found myself standing next to Al Gore, former U.S. Vice President and original thinker behind the Digital Earth concept. It was a privilege, and a rare opportunity for me to be able to tell him about the success of Digital Earth Australia paving the way for the Committee on Earth Observation Satellites (CEOS) Open Data Cube and the work GEO and its partners are doing to expand the Africa Regional Data Cube to the entire African continent as part of transformational Digital Earth Africa programme.

Stemming from these and other conversations at WEF, my goal is to elevate the awareness of the value and usefulness of Earth observations (EO) science, technology and policy to respond to sustainable development. I would love to work with the global EO community at this leadership level and also bring in some grassroots activities to get a feel for both top-down and bottom-up approaches to evidence-informed policymaking. Feel free to get in touch at [sramage@geosec.org](mailto:sramage@geosec.org) with your insights.

*The original version of this contribution was published at [www.sdsntrends.org](http://www.sdsntrends.org), the website of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network.*

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<https://www.gim-international.com/content/blog/on-earth-observations-for-evidence-based-policymaking-and-other-reflections-from-the-wef-annual-meeting-2019>

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