Eye on Earth Summit Calls for Practical Actions

The second Eye on Earth Summit, held from 6-8 October 2015, has concluded with a commitment by delegates to implement a number of mechanisms, recommendations and practical actions around the supply, demand and enabling conditions of data considered essential to support informed decision-making and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. These include addressing the data needs of specific geographic regions, how to harness big data for sustainable development, building capacity for how best to use this data when reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ensuring that countries have the technological infrastructure and skill sets in place to incorporate such data into their decision-making processes.

The Summit also highlighted the important role of citizen science and it was agreed that a global coalition of citizen science groups will be established by the Eye on Earth Alliance to continue to engage such groups so that new data can be generated in areas where gaps are evident.

The Summit outcomes are central to advancing Eye on Earth's vision of achieving a world where environmental and associated social and economic information, combined with citizen engagement, improves decisions leading to sustainable development, said H.E. Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, secretary-general of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, a founding partner of Eye on Earth. They will make a direct contribution towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and also, crucially, help to monitor progress through quality reporting.

2030 Sustainable Development Agenda

The recent adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda at the UN Summit in New York has generated renewed interest in addressing the enormous challenge of identifying and delivering the data needed to track the SDGs on a global scale, and sharing knowledge among stakeholders engaged in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Summit generated incisive debate among leading experts and the consensus that emerged was:

- Country reporting against the SDGs requires diverse data that is timely, relevant and reliable
- The disparate nature of the data provider landscape will require close collaboration and engagement of a wide array of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, including the private sector, to support the SDG reporting process
- Capacity building and technology support must be intensified with strong donor support in order to assist developing countries in meeting their reporting obligations
- The Eye on Earth Network has a key role to play in facilitating institutional networking and collaboration for tracking progress towards achieving the SDGs.

Collective responsibility

UNEP executive director Achim Steiner said there is a collective responsibility to make sure that the post-2015 development agenda is delivered. Getting citizens and businesses to engage in this global agenda will be vital. Fortunately there is a vast number of new and innovative ways to involve citizens and business in monitoring and generating information and to track progress.

At the Eye on Earth Summit many great examples of citizen science and engagement were presented. UNEP is helping to capture these in cutting edge digital collaborative spaces such as The World We Want, engaging people in the development goals and UNEP Live, collecting, processing and sharing the world's best environmental data, science and knowledge, Steiner added.

The Summit also identified priority areas to be addressed under the evolving Eye on Earth programmes of work including:

- Data needs of policymakers
- Capacity building for reporting against the SDGs
- Harnessing the Data Revolution
- The role of technology support
- Mechanisms for inter-regional networking and knowledge sharing
- The data needs of the Arab Region
- Data issues of Small Island Developing States (SIDS)
- Data issues relevant to polar and cold regions

- Building knowledge for healthy lives
- An action plan to implement Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration, considered the global standard for the promotion of environmental democracy.

Special Interest Groups

Another noteable outcome was a call from from several participating organisations to establish Special Interest Groups (SIGs) on priority issues where data delivery, information access and knowledge sharing needs to be enhanced to support the 2030 sustainable development agenda. Narrow in scope, these SIGs aim to bring together communities of experts to find solutions to very specific data issues. More than 30 proposals were received during the Summit, covering issues from both a thematic and geographic perspective, where capacities need to be strengthened. Seven of the proposals aim to focus on addressing specific data issues within the Arab region.

The Eye on Earth Alliance partners also agreed to formalise a governance framework and institutional arrangements by the end of 2015. The five existing members - AGEDI, GEO, IUCN, UNEP and WRI – announced plans to enlarge the Alliance strategically to support regional and thematic interests. By the close of the Summit they had received six expressions of interest from major organisations around the world to join the Alliance.

Shared future

In her closing address H.E. Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak called on Summit delegates and the wider global community to lend their support to the Eye on Earth movement: It is no longer possible for one entity, agency, government or region to work independently. No one member can carry the burden alone. We must share the responsibility and we must collectively strengthen our resolve. The task ahead is too large and too important. We need to commit to a shared future where environmental and societal data can improve decisions that lead to a more sustainable planet, said Al Mubarak.

Davos for Data

The Summit was convened by an Alliance of five organisations – the Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative (AGEDI), the Group on Earth Observations (GEO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Resources Institute (WRI). The event is establishing its own global niche as the "Davos for Data" by building networks and capacity across diverse knowledge communities to improve decision-making for sustainable development. More than 650 thought leaders from around the world, including governmental policy-makers, scientists, researchers, technology developers, advocacy groups, non-governmental organisations, and representatives of international organisations attended the Summit, focused on addressing the key issues underpinning informed decision-making for sustainable development, which was the Summit's main theme.

An Executive Summary of Eye on Earth Summit Outcome Document is available on the Summit website (www.eoesummit.org). The proceedings of the Summit, which will include detailed reports on all sessions, will be available in early November.