

# Strengthening the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem

Need assessment on a cross-sector  
collaboration space for accelerating  
the achievement of the Sustainable  
Development Goals in Geneva





## Background to the Study

Grounded in the understanding that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can only be achieved through effective collaboration, this study arises from the needs expressed by the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem members<sup>1</sup> for a collaborative space in Geneva in which individuals, civil society, international organizations, academia, and the private sector can share information, resources, activities, and capabilities to foster the attainment of the SDGs.

While several studies have been directed at assessing the potential of partnerships for achieving the SDGs, limited research and consideration have gone into assessing the need of a physical space for cross-sectoral collaboration, particularly given the uniqueness of the Geneva ecosystem of organizations working to implement the SDGs.

This need assessment was conducted through a partnership between the SDG Lab and Impact Hub Geneva.

### SDG LAB

The SDG Lab is a multistakeholder initiative of which the International Institute for Sustainable Development is a key partner. Hosted at United Nations (UN) Geneva, the SDG Lab works to advance implementation of the SDGs through fostering and strengthening collaboration and partnerships.

The SDG Lab and IISD co-convene the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem since 2016.

### IMPACT HUB GENEVA

Impact Hub Geneva is a curated collaboration and innovation space, facilitating a community of over 250 entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, innovators, and changemakers tackling the world's most pressing issues. Founded in 2014, it offers individuals and organizations access to innovation expertise, trainings and programs to scale their impact, as well as inspiring working spaces, events, and networking opportunities.

It is part of the global Impact Hub network, which boasts more than 25,000 members in over 100 cities across the world with proven expertise in community building, curation, and management to increase innovation and entrepreneurship for the SDGs.

### DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this publication, including their respective citations and bibliography, do not imply any endorsement on the part of the SDG Lab at UN Geneva or the members of the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem.

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<sup>1</sup> Geneva 2030 Ecosystem, also referred to as the Geneva SDG Community, is a dynamic network of over 370 individuals representing 215 Geneva-based organizations.



## Executive Summary

The global challenges we face today are complex interconnected issues that, to be solved, require collaboration across sectors and organizations to support the emergence of innovative solutions through collective thinking and increased efficiency by sharing resources. Geneva, as the host city of many international and non-governmental organizations, plays a key role in nurturing an ecosystem conducive to collaboration for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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“What you have in Geneva and practically nowhere else is an enormous density of expertise, especially on the SDGs and the operational part of the UN.”<sup>2</sup>

Alexandre Schaerer, FDFA, Labour and Digitalization, Deputy Head of Office, Counselor

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The Geneva ecosystem contains clear strengths that make it a unique environment for collaboration. These include the density and expertise of international organizations and non-governmental organizations; the inclination toward global issues; the operational focus of international organizations in the city; neutrality; and existing efforts for collaboration and innovation on topics related to the SDGs, such as the convening of the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem.

However, there are also challenges to effective collaboration. These include varying degrees of institutional culture for innovation and resources allocated to collaboration, onerous bureaucratic processes, and duplication of efforts. This study posits that the lack of publicly accessible collaborative spaces in the Nations area for actors in this diverse ecosystem represents a significant challenge to realizing the full potential of collaboration in Geneva.

This study aims to test the assumption that a new, publicly accessible collaboration space in the Nations area would enhance collaboration among stakeholders working on SDG implementation both within and outside of the UN system.

Members of the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem have expressed the need for a space that truly convenes the creation of a connected community: a space that is accessible, inclusive, informal, and inspiring while also being curated and purpose-driven, geared toward skills development, expertise, and showcasing.

This brief presents the main findings from the need assessment, including recommendations for potential next steps to set up a new collaboration space in the proximity of the Nations area in Geneva.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with the Swiss mission to the UN, May 2, 2022.



# 1. The Importance of an Ecosystem Approach to Sustainable Development Goal Implementation

The world today faces unprecedented global challenges: the climate crisis, conflicts, poverty, and growing inequality are but some of the biggest challenges highlighted by the UN Secretary-General.<sup>3</sup> The UN is tasked with working alongside and supporting UN member states in addressing these cross-cutting global challenges as framed by the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs. The 2030 Agenda calls for collective action and integrated approaches, underscoring the need for an integrated and multistakeholder approach, one that equally engages UN member states, civil society, academia, the private sector, and foundations, among others.

Collaboration is key to achieving the SDGs. It sparks the emergence of new ideas through collective thinking, thereby enhancing innovation. It can also increase efficiency through the sharing of resources and avoiding the duplicating of efforts.

As the European headquarters of the UN, host to over 40 international organizations and almost 700 non-governmental organizations,<sup>4</sup> Geneva and its ecosystem of actors have made important progress in nurturing this unique community with its diverse expertise on SDG implementation. However, there is greater potential to foster even more effective collaborations for the goals—for this to happen, there are certain conditions that need to improve.

The city's role as host of the UN's European headquarters goes beyond providing a physical space. It requires further fostering of an inspiring and strong ecosystem that works for tackling global challenges.

## Study Methodology

This study explores the strengths and challenges of the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem. It highlights the need for a collaborative space—including the desired characteristics and operational setup of such a space—and outlines the stakeholders that would benefit from it.

The study is based on desk research, a stakeholder mapping exercise, a survey of members of the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem, and 27 interviews with key stakeholders in Geneva.

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council. (n.d.). *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals*. [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/29858SG\\_SDG\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2022.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/29858SG_SDG_Progress_Report_2022.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations Office and to the other international organizations in Geneva. (2022). *Facts and figures about international Geneva*. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/missions/mission-onu-geneve/en/home/geneve-international/faits-et-chiffres.html>



## 2. What are the Opportunities and Challenges for Effective Collaboration for the SDGs in Geneva?

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“We need more innovative, multisectoral and multi-thematic partnerships that can be brought to scale quickly, engaging all parts of society, and particularly the young people who will be key to the success of the 2030 Agenda.”<sup>5</sup>

Amina J. Mohammed – UN Deputy Secretary-General, September 27, 2018

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This section analyzes the local context in terms of the strengths and challenges of the Geneva ecosystem to better understand how collaboration might be enhanced with a dedicated space.

### Opportunities for Collaboration

Interviewees recognized the value and potential for enhancing SDG-implementation through the international ecosystem of Geneva—with its high concentration of international organizations, non-governmental organizations, academic and research institutions—as a value to the city and a potential asset for collaboration. The small size of the city brings a density of expertise that is a great asset to all organizations located in Geneva and the greater Lac Lemman region. The operational nature of the actors and expertise of the ecosystem combined with the neutrality of Switzerland in the international arena emerged as a strength, increasing opportunities for collaboration and making Geneva a perfect location for open conversations about sensitive issues.

There are good examples of existing efforts in Geneva focused on enhancing collaboration: one is the Geneva platforms, which bring together organizations working in similar fields, providing a clear mapping of the international organizations present in the city and providing initiatives to enhance synergies and knowledge sharing. The Geneva 2030 Ecosystem represents a similar platform bringing together SDG actors.

A number of initiatives involving academia also exist: the SDG Solution Space, Open Geneva, and the forthcoming project “La Fabrique” by the Geneva Graduate Institute.<sup>6</sup> Other actors strengthening the ecosystem in the Nations area include the Geneva Innovation Movement and Impact Hub Geneva.

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations. (2018). *2030 Agenda requires embrace of integrated thinking, Deputy Secretary-General says at conference, calls for breaking down silos, forging partnerships* [Press release]. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/dsgsm1227.doc.htm>

<sup>6</sup> This project was presented by the Director of the Geneva Graduate Institute during the interview.



Within UN agencies, interest in spurring internal innovation is growing.<sup>7</sup> Frequently mentioned as key players during the interviews conducted is the International Trade Centre's Innovation Lab as well as the UN Children's Fund's office of innovation, UN High Commissioner for Refugees' innovation service, and the World Health Organization innovation hub. The UN Innovation Network plays an important role in linking these different units and introducing a culture of innovation through its "Innovation toolkit."

The most common strengths of the Ecosystem mentioned in the interviews are the following:

1. The propensity to discuss global matters and approaches, considering Geneva's role as a world-renowned multilateral and governance hub with "gravitational power."<sup>8</sup>
2. The operational nature of the ecosystem, which bridges the gap between policy and activities at country level.
3. The neutrality of the country and the city, which allows for open conversations.
4. The existing platforms, spaces, and initiatives that promote an integrated approach to the SDGs and enhance collaboration.

## Challenges for Collaboration

Effective collaboration among the different stakeholders in the Geneva ecosystem is challenged by several factors.

A central issue that stands out from this study is the differing degrees of an institutional culture geared toward collaboration and innovation (and, by implication, the lack of resources allocated to it). In a number of instances, innovation is not prioritized in an employee's agenda, and several interviewees mentioned that they would like more opportunities for this but often lack resources (e.g., time and funding).

In the case of the UN, the institutional culture is also highly influenced by processes that can hinder or impede innovative approaches. In any sector, bureaucracy represents an obstacle to multistakeholder collaboration; however, in the UN, due to stringent policy measures and necessary safeguarding measures, the process by which an organization must go through to establish a formal collaboration agreement is lengthy, and establishing the initial contact can be challenging, according to some interviewees.

Another challenge is duplication of efforts due to a lack of communication and coordination for an integrated approach in efforts related to SDG implementation.

The presence of international ecosystems in relatively small cities such as Geneva or Brussels "seem[s] to lead to the emergence of 'closed worlds'"<sup>9</sup> or "bubbles" that do not encourage collaboration. Innovation teams within the UN engage in collaboration with external actors but only to a limited extent, especially when it comes to the private sector and local

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<sup>7</sup> Bloom, L., & Faulkner, R. (2015). *Innovation spaces: Transforming humanitarian practice in the United Nations*. Refugee Studies Centre. <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/files-1/wp107-innovation-spaces.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Francesco Pisano, April 21, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Dairon, E., & Badache, F. (2021). Understanding international organizations' headquarters as ecosystems. *Global Policy*, 12(7), p. 26. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1758-5899.12956>



entrepreneurs. However, 72% of the survey respondents indicated that they would like to collaborate more with private sector and local entrepreneurs. In addition, the Nations area in Geneva, where the density of international organizations and non-governmental organizations is higher than anywhere else in the city, lacks spaces for community gatherings and informal events that could enhance creativity, exchange, and innovation, such as spaces to gather outside of work, e.g., cafés, bars, or restaurants that would support informal networking.

The main challenges arising from the study's findings are:

1. Insufficient institutional culture and resources allocated to collaboration for innovation.
2. Bureaucracy, which can pose obstacles to collaboration, particularly with UN organizations.
3. Duplication of efforts due to a lack of communication and of an integrated approach for the achievement of the SDGs.
4. Limited cross-sector collaboration between international Geneva and local Geneva actors.
5. Lack of publicly accessible and open spaces in the Nations area.

### 3. So What Do We Need in Geneva?

From the data gathered through brainstorming sessions, interviews, and the survey, this study presents a needs assessment regarding how to enhance the collaboration of the Geneva ecosystem for the SDGs. The themes and needs emerging from the assessment can be divided into five main topics. The Geneva Ecosystem needs a space that is accessible, inclusive, curated, informal, and inspiring. It should provide activities geared toward learning and showcasing solutions and best practices. The following section explores these points in more detail.

#### Accessible

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“Easy access to certain UN premises is a big issue and often hinders the organization of more collaborative events. Just this point can be considered one of the best arguments in favour of establishing a space outside UN premises.”<sup>10</sup>

Daniela Wuerz, Change Manager at UN office in Geneva

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The high security standards of UN buildings influence people's access to facilities and services, including events, meetings, training, workshops, and others. Providing accessible spaces and services, such as co-working areas, event spaces, and a café or restaurant would foster networking and exchanges between actors from all sectors.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Daniela Wuerz, June 1, 2022.



## Inclusive

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“Inclusivity is one word we need to strengthen in this conversation. Such a space could contribute to the inclusion of youth, youth organizations, or cities. And do not forget that international Geneva is about the whole world and not only the Western world; contribute to having a more universal international Geneva.”<sup>11</sup>

Olivier Coutau, Delegate to International Geneva

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For the scope of this study, inclusivity is used as an umbrella term to encompass i) inclusivity of different stakeholders (international organizations, non-governmental organizations, academia, the private sector, entrepreneurs and civil society); ii) intergenerational inclusivity of young people and students; iii) connection between the local and international; iv) openness to the general public.

## Curated

The space needs to be curated and should integrate public services with meeting and event rooms. To encourage cross-sector collaboration and innovation, there is a need for a consciously facilitated space, attracting different stakeholders and facilitating personal and professional connections through community-building events and activities.

The process of activating and nurturing a collaborative community is a non-linear process that emerges from the creation of favourable conditions for collaboration. Community builders are those entities that have an overview and connection with the wider ecosystem and are capable of making links and creating a network. This requires a host with experience and knowledge in convening communities and creating networks to increase the quality of a collaborative space.

## Informal

The interviews and survey respondents clearly stated the need for informal gathering spaces that can be conducive to informal networking and knowledge sharing, such as cafés, restaurants and other hospitality services, coupled with inspiring events, arts, music, and other informal activities connecting the ecosystem.

67%

of survey respondents think that an informal networking space is missing in the Nations area

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with the Office for International Geneva, May 3, 2022.





## Inspiring

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“You should have co-working spaces, to have coffee, to have lunch; you need closed rooms where you can brainstorm equipped with facilities but at the same time it’s rooms in different formats, with different capacities. You need a location with a spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

Tatjana Darani, Director of Foundation Portail des Nations

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Studies have shown that physical space and the surrounding environment influence people’s ways of thinking and working, and that the quality of a space comes also from the quality of its atmosphere. In fact, a space can increase collaboration and communication among its users because of how it is designed and organized.<sup>13</sup>

## Geared Toward Learning

Connected to the curation of the space, opportunities for skills development were often mentioned in the assessment. Skills development includes leveraging the density of expertise available in Geneva through, for example, a capacity-building platform or a pool of experts to consult on different issues. Equally important is collective-knowledge exercises, such as future and foresight thinking sessions or hackathons, which would ideally complement traditional learning and skills development services. In particular, the interviewees indicated three areas in which they would like to develop more skills: i) innovative methodologies, such as agile design or design thinking; ii) sustainable or innovative finance; iii) digitalization and new technologies.

Almost **70%**  
of survey respondents indicated networking and matchmaking as an activity that would help their organization enhance collaboration for the SDGs.

**72%**  
of survey respondents would like to enhance their knowledge about innovation methodologies

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Tatjana Darani, May 13, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Waber, B., Magnolfi, J., & Lindsay, G. (2014). Workspaces that move people. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2014/10/workspaces-that-move-people>



## Showcasing

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“Sometimes we struggle to see the innovations that other agencies are working on that could be beneficial for us. We don’t have that visibility.”<sup>14</sup>

Nathalie Rami, Deputy Head of Innovation Service at UNHCR

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There is a strong need to learn what other organizations or companies are doing. Several interviewees indicated that they would like a space to showcase their own innovations, products, or digital tools. This would help avoid duplication of efforts, exchange knowledge, foster new collaborations and support each other’s work. In addition, there is a strong need to connect more with the private sector and understand how public–private partnerships could be fostered.

In conclusion, although this collaborative space should have specific and well-defined characteristics to accommodate the interests of a multistakeholder community, it should also remain flexible enough to avoid the risk of creating yet another silo.

## Potential Scenarios and Next Steps

The physical location and structure of the space will also have a great impact on the scale and type of services and activities it would be able to provide. While this would need to be explored in further detail (beyond the scope of this study), three potential future scenarios could be:

1. Identifying a suitable building in the Nations area that could be adapted for hosting a collaborative space. Villa les Feuillantines has been mentioned in the interviews as an ideal location for a collaborative space due to its central position and inspiring atmosphere immersed in nature. Other possibilities include Villa Rigot and Villa Masaryk.
2. Construction of a new building, allowing for more targeted design. This would require more time and resources.
3. Establishing an agreement with an in-place collaborative space, such as the SDG Solution Space, the Centre de Conférences de Genève, Palais Wilson, or one of the forthcoming spaces in the Nations area.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with UNHCR Innovation Services, May 18, 2022



## 4. Conclusion

Geneva's international ecosystem and density of expertise, coupled with the operational and neutral nature of the city, have made it a unique place to foster collaboration for the achievement of the SDGs. However, the ecosystem's strengths are not always leveraged: differing degrees of innovation culture, division into "silos," and a lack of easy-to-access spaces are challenging issues that, if solved, could release the full potential of Geneva for further collaboration and innovation for global impact.

The interviews and data reveal a strong sentiment regarding the need to further "break down the silos." An accessible collaboration space is needed to connect individuals and organizations within the ecosystem, and to encourage greater collaborative and integrated approaches to global challenges.

The Nations area needs a multifunctional space for informal gathering, networking, events, learning, peer sharing, creative activities, and skills development, which would support Geneva-based organizations and actors in their operations and strengthen the city's ecosystem. Such a space, combining both hospitality management and community building, would enhance and maximize the knowledge sharing and expertise of the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem through enhanced collaboration. It would thus further existing initiatives to build a more inclusive and connected ecosystem for addressing the global challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals in an integrated manner.

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