

Official Side Event of the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2026

Trust as Infrastructure for SDG 11:

Strengthening Sustainable Development Through Credibility,
Behavior Change, and System Design



Tuesday, July 14
1:00 - 2:00pm EST

[Register here](#)



Virtual Event

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Across global contexts, **trust in institutions has been widely recognized as declining**, posing a growing challenge for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including but not limited to SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. Whereas significant focus has been devoted to financing, technology, and partnerships, less attention has been given to the **social conditions that determine whether these efforts succeed in practice.**

Cities provide a critical lens through which to understand this dynamic. As the primary sites of implementation for many SDGs – including SDG 11’s goal to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable – these environments demonstrate a consistent pattern: the presence of policy, traditional infrastructure, or investment does not guarantee impact. **Outcomes, instead, depend on how individuals and institutions interact with the systems created – whether they engage with them, trust them, and sustain participation over time.**

Research across social science and applied lessons from governance shows that **trust functions as a form of “soft infrastructure”**. It shapes whether people **believe their participation matters**, whether **systems are perceived as fair**, and whether stakeholders are **willing to collaborate** across sectors. **Procedural justice** further demonstrates that how decisions are made – particularly whether processes are transparent, consistent, and accessible – **plays a critical role in building or eroding trust.**

At the same time, **trust is not only linked to policy uptake, but also to broader well-being and social stability**, reinforcing its importance as a cross-cutting condition for sustainable development.

Examples from participatory governance in both the United States and Brazil illustrate that while **trust** can be built in different ways, it **must be intentionally designed into systems.**

Hosted by and featuring speakers from the **American Psychological Association (APA)**, which holds Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), in collaboration with the **Brazilian Society of Psychology**, **this side event explores how trust functions as essential infrastructure for achieving SDG 11.**

Participants will gain practical insights into how behavioral science can support more effective approaches toward public engagement, participatory governance, policy implementation, climate action, and community resilience.

Objectives

1. Understand how trust is built, eroded, and repaired

- Review the core components within the context of institutions, ranging from local government to global organizations
- Discuss how trust functions as a foundational condition for sustainable development across sectors, building from an initial focus on SDG 11.

2. Explore how procedural justice, system design, and communication influence outcomes, including:

- Stakeholder engagement and collaboration
- Policy and program adoption
- Long-term participation

3. Building from case studies, identify practical strategies for designing trust to achieve SDG 11

- Examine various approaches toward centering, measuring, and sustaining trust within complex systems
- Consider safeguarding measures to reinforce trust during times of uncertainty, rapid change, or other challenges.