

HLPF 2018 Highlights: Monday, 9 July 2018

The 2018 meeting of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) opened on Monday, 9 July 2018, at UN Headquarters in New York. In the morning, the opening session focused on progress in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A session on implementing the 2030 Agenda for resilient societies followed, with sub-sessions on: reviewing progress in achieving the SDGs; and better data for sustainable development. In the afternoon, a review of SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) took place.

Opening Session

This session was chaired by Marie Chatardová, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic and President, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In her opening remarks, Chatardová invited participants to adopt the provisional agenda (E/HLPF/2018/1). She said the participation of over 80 ministers and vice ministers and 2500 non-state actors in the HLPF this year exemplifies the rallying power of the SDGs.

Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General of Economic and Social Affairs, presented the UN Secretary-General's SDG progress report. He noted a decline in numbers living in extreme poverty, but flagged several challenges, including: climate change and conflict zones; inadequate social protection; the rise of hunger; gender inequality; pressures on land, forests, and livelihoods; an overall decrease in global official development assistance (ODA); and underfunding of data collection for SDGs in developing countries.

Keynote speaker Jeffrey Sachs, Columbia University, said greed and the vested interests of coal, oil and gas companies are the biggest obstacle to the achievement of the SDGs. He called out the global food industry's unsustainable supply chains and unhealthy products. Citing sustainable development and happiness rankings, he noted that sustainable development promotes wellbeing and happiness, while tax cuts for the rich undermine infrastructure, education and health services. He called on rich countries and individuals to address the \$200 billion financing gap to achieve the SDGs, by: increasing ODA; using 1% of the wealth of the world's 2208 billionaires to ensure education for every child and universal health care access; closing down off-shore tax regimes; taxing the five big technology monopoly companies given their use of public data; taxing financial transactions; establishing a global carbon tax; and adopting measures to address tax evasion.

Keynote speaker María Soledad Cisternas Reyes, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility, outlined ways to make the 2030 Agenda more inclusive, including by increasing access to technology to ensure human rights and strengthen democracy. She underlined the central role that corporations can play by investing in the SDGs.

Keynote speaker Alex Steffen, Worldchanging.com, said the existing tension between sustainable and unsustainable economies can be resolved by technology and human innovation. He stressed the importance of speed in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Resilient Societies

This session was chaired by ECOSOC President Chatardová and moderated by Emily Pryor, Data2X.

Reviewing progress in achieving the SDGs: Opening this sub-session, Pryor highlighted the examples of Finland and Vietnam in collecting and using gender-disaggregated data.

Panelist Ása Regnér, UN Women, noted that while girls attend school more than they did a decade ago, and more women participate in political settings, progress is slow with women being disproportionately affected by extreme poverty and the lack of access to safe, drinkable water.

Panelist Pádraig Dalton, Central Statistics Office of Ireland, highlighted: the need to ensure that the institutions that gather and compile SDG-related data are trusted by both citizens and policy-makers; and the importance of making data accessible and digestible for policy-makers.

Panelist Grace Bediako, National Development Planning Commission, Ghana, said the SDGs are being implemented in Ghana through a decentralized planning system, which involves the participation of 15 ministries and a national SDG Implementation Committee that is responsible for multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral coordination.

Lead discussant Sofia Monsalve Suárez, FIAN International, noted the lack of sufficient data to assess inequality, both within and between countries. While recognizing the need for "big data" for achieving the SDGs, she cautioned that the way data is being compiled and used does not always respect human rights.

In the ensuing discussion, SWITZERLAND highlighted the need to, *inter alia*: collect data at the community level and build feedback loops into national statistical systems; ensure a more coordinated UN statistical system; and integrate diverse sources in data collection processes. CHILDREN AND YOUTH called for a focus on collecting data on risk factors. PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES stressed the need to enhance focus on disability-disaggregated data. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES emphasized the importance of taking into account their perspectives.

Better data for sustainable development: Panelist Zachary Chege, UN Statistical Commission, highlighted the link between data gaps in measuring progress and poor development outcomes, and called for better donor coordination to address underfunding. He noted the imminent launch of a financing framework for data related to the SDGs at the World Data Forum in Dubai in October 2018.

Panelist Nancy Potok, US Chief Statistician, underlined the important curatorial role of national statistical offices (NSOs) in turning reliable data into insights, while calling for improved coordination of worldwide statistical capacity.

Panelist Shaida Badiee, Open Data Watch, said there is a \$280 million annual financing gap for data to track the SDGs. Noting that this is equivalent to the salaries of two male football stars, she called for political support, domestic financing, and demonstration of the value of investing in data.

Lead discussant Leesha Delatie-Budair, Statistical Institute of Jamaica, underlined the need to mainstream SDGs in global, regional, and national statistical programmes. She called for: improved technical capacity in NSOs; building institutional capacity; dissemination of information to the public; and special consideration for indebted and vulnerable countries.

In the discussion that followed, KENYA flagged the importance of establishing a timeframe for the mechanism for collecting data on Tier II and III of the SDG indicators. DENMARK called for more attention to the data challenges of countries at the bottom of the SDG index. NGOs called for more use of data collected by CSOs. ITALY stressed the need for coordination among NSOs, and for conducting needs assessments. SOUTH AFRICA called for strengthening cooperation, particularly in the area of technology for statistical development. SAUDI ARABIA called on data sources to respect UN criteria for data collection. EL SALVADOR pointed to a correlation between the statistical capacity of countries and their achievement of the SDGs.

Responding to questions, Chege underlined the need for resource and information sharing. Potok cautioned against creating more bureaucratic organizations, such as regional centers of excellence. Badiee called for additional resources and transfer of expertise to help smaller and more vulnerable countries.

Review of SDG Implementation

This session, chaired by Mahmadamin Mahmadaminov, Permanent Representative of Tajikistan and ECOSOC Vice-President, reviewed the implementation of SDG 6. It was moderated by Joakim Harlin, UN-Water.

Yongyi Min, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), highlighted conflict as a barrier to achieving SDG 6, explaining that 83% of people living in fragile states lack access to safe drinking water. Noting that more than 2 billion people are affected by water stress, which will be further intensified by climate change, she cautioned that the share of ODA to water-related activities is declining.

Stefan Uhlenbrook, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), underscored that the world is not on track to achieve SDG 6. He noted that fresh water pollution is increasing worldwide, while climate change is impacting water quality. Highlighting that water is a prerequisite for peace and stability, he called for increasing water efficiency in production and in the agriculture and energy sectors.

Keynote speaker Mina Guli, water advocate and “ultra runner”, said she is preparing to run 100 marathons in 100 days to raise awareness of global water stress. She emphasized that the lack of access to safe drinking water perpetuates gender inequalities by increasing the time spent by women on fetching water, reducing the time for education and income-generating activities.

Panelist Danilo Türk, Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace and former President of Slovenia, said the lack of political leadership for expanded water cooperation is the main obstacle for the resolution of the emerging water crisis. He noted the interest of the UN Security Council in exploring the links between water and peace.

Panelist Callist Tindimugaya, Ministry of Water and Environment, Uganda, called for enhanced transboundary collaboration on water management, and pointed to the role of financial and high-level political support.

Panelist Claudia Sadoff, International Water Management Institute, appealed for more circular, sustainable thinking about water. Characterizing the water crisis as a crisis in water governance, she said governance, reform, and partnerships are critical factors, in addition to technology and infrastructure, to achieve SDG 6.

Panelist Lucía Ruiz, Vice Minister of Environment, Peru, highlighted the need for integrated water management and the active participation of holders of indigenous knowledge.

Lead discussant Thomas Stratenwerth, Ministry of Environment, Germany, called for a formally mandated meeting to advise the UN system on SDG 6.

Lead discussant Neil Jeffery, Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor, outlined his company’s work in Africa and Asia on building institutional capacity.

In the discussion that followed, ALGERIA described how climate change, drought, floods and socio-economic changes have deepened water stress. The EU highlighted good governance, cross-border cooperation, and the role of water diplomacy in underpinning peace and security. SWEDEN described how water features as an important element of her country’s feminist foreign policy. MEXICO repeated a call for more political attention to SDG 6 in the HLPF process.

Léo Heller, Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, called for a further incorporation of human rights, including the affordability principle and the treatment of inequalities in disaggregated data.

WOMEN said approaching water as a technical issue requiring mega-infrastructure does not meet the needs of women, girls, and marginalized communities. The INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY gave examples of using nuclear techniques for water management. FINLAND said they are looking to match their current international water strategy to the 2030 Agenda. INDONESIA outlined work in promoting access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

Lead discussant Florencio Marerua, WaterAid, underscored the importance of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) in preventing maternal and neonatal mortality.

Lead discussant Ney Maranhão, National Water Resources Agency, Brazil, spoke about Brazil’s experience in building water tanks to address desertification.

PALESTINE highlighted the water stress caused by the conflict with Israel. WORKERS & TRADE UNIONS cautioned against the privatization of water systems and called for their re-municipalization to improve equity in service delivery. SENEGAL emphasized the need for water diplomacy to ensure international peace and security. The INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT called for respect for the customary rights of smallholder farmers and Indigenous Peoples.

Responding to comments, Türk proposed an international conference on water management to discuss infrastructure and financing. Sadoff said cities could become water-producers, not only water-consumers.

In the Corridors

“You can’t treasure what you can’t measure” has been a founding mantra for the architects of the SDGs, with their reliance on indicators, data and statistics. On the first day of HLPF, however, it seemed that the growing specter of “big data” may have cast its shadow. While Jeffrey Sachs decried the lack of transparency in the way the five big technology companies use their monopoly status to mine and use data, NGOs have become increasingly animated about the political dimensions of data ‘science’ and collection, including human rights implications, and the gap between the ‘data rich and data poor’. They believe concerns about funding gaps for public data capacity for SDGs stand in stark contrast with the financial power of private handlers of “big data”. Panelists from NSOs, in turn, went to great lengths to emphasize the ethical use of data by public institutions, and their commitment to guarantee the transparency and reliability of information, while drawing attention gently back to the gap in funding statistical capacity for the SDGs.