

HLPF 2019 Highlights: Tuesday, 9 July 2019

The 2019 meeting of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) opened on Tuesday, 9 July 2019, at UN Headquarters in New York. In the morning, the opening session focused on progress in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) four years after implementation started. This was followed by a session on progress, gaps, and obstacles in leaving no one behind. In the afternoon, a review of SDG implementation and interrelations among goals took place, focussing on a discussion on SDG 4 (quality education).

Opening Session

This session was chaired by Inga Rhonda King, Permanent Representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and President, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In opening remarks, she noted that the 2019 HLPF session has special importance because: it is the last meeting in the HLPF's first cycle, marking the conclusion of the first review of all 17 SDGs, discussion on four themes, and presentation of 142 voluntary national reviews (VNRs); it will send messages to the SDG Summit in September 2019; it will initiate discussions on the performance of the HLPF in the past four years, and changes needed; and it will reflect on collective progress in SDG implementation globally, regionally, nationally, and locally.

Valentin Rybakov, Permanent Representative of Belarus and ECOSOC Vice-President, presented key messages from the ECOSOC Integration Segment, noting: the VNR process was useful for engaging stakeholders and spurring SDG integration in national development plans; and all actors, including the private sector, should be engaged, to change behaviors that jeopardize the implementation of the SDGs.

Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said the HLPF has supported the 2030 Agenda by facilitating countries in accelerating and tracking implementation. He announced a new online platform on the SDG Summit website, to record actions supporting the implementation of SDGs.

Najat Maalla M'jid, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on Violence against Children, highlighted: SDG target 16.2 on eliminating violence against children, saying violence against children undermines the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda; stronger legal frameworks; better and more data on what works; more partnerships; and rights for children at the national level.

Chris Skinner, author and commentator, said financial technology is changing delivery of financial services, including in reaching people excluded from banking and financial services, in spite of the initial lag in the use of digital technology.

Yolanda Joab Mori, One Young World Ambassador, stressed the need to close the disconnect between governments and grassroots to translate the 2030 Agenda to action on the ground, and presented key messages from the ECOSOC Youth Forum, including the importance of investments in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) so young people can become problem-solvers.

Progress, Gaps, and Obstacles: Are we on track for leaving no one behind?

This session included two parts: where do we stand; and who is at risk of being left behind.

Where do we stand? Moderator Minh-Thu Pham, UN Foundation, invited a focus on financing when addressing gaps in SDG implementation. Keynote speaker Liu Zheming presented the UN Secretary-General's Progress Report on the SDGs, saying despite a number of critical challenges in implementation, the SDGs are being mainstreamed into planning; actors beyond governments are embracing the 2030 Agenda; and the UN system is re-positioning itself to better support the implementation of the SDGs.

Panelist Julio Santaella, National Institute of Statistics and Geography, Mexico, noted that existing gaps in collecting data on SDG indicators are related to the technical capacity of countries, the technical complexity of indicators, and granularity to ensure no one is left behind. He said a global assessment of the SDG indicators will take place in 2020.

Panelist Marta Acosta, Auditor General, Costa Rica, presented the findings of Supreme Audit Institutions on SDG achievements and challenges. She said some governments have made important headway in identifying national performance indicators, while others have not yet started the process.

Panelist Robin Ogilvy, Special Representative and Permanent Observer of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to the UN, highlighted persistent gender pay gaps, stark economic inequality, and obesity, which affects more than 30% of the population in OECD countries.

Panelist Thomas Brooks, International Union for Conservation of Nature, said the dangerous ecosystem deterioration highlighted by the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem

Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) impacts most vulnerable populations and those left behind, as their livelihoods depend on nature. He stressed the importance of an ambitious post-2020 global biodiversity framework to support SDG implementation.

In the discussion that followed, the EU highlighted: hunger being on the rise for three years in a row; increasing biodiversity loss; and rising greenhouse gas emissions. IRAN called on states to refrain from promulgating unilateral economic measures. INDONESIA highlighted the importance of information and communication technology (ICT) in reducing inequality. SWEDEN emphasized the need for a multidimensional measure of poverty to reduce inequality. WOMEN highlighted the role of women in implementing SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

The VOLUNTEER GROUPS ALLIANCE urged recognition of volunteer-led mechanisms that ensure inclusion of those furthest from government services. BOTSWANA said inclusion of persons with disabilities is given priority in his country. FINLAND emphasized the need to address employment and equal opportunities for marginalized communities worldwide. TURKEY highlighted the role of the UN Technology Bank, launched in 2018 to support least developed countries (LDCs) in addressing technology gaps.

In conclusion, the panelists highlighted the need to: address barriers to inclusion; increase engagement of non-government agencies; strengthen domestic financial capacity by investing in tax collection capacity; and involve non-state actors in measuring and reporting on SDG implementation.

Who is at risk of being left behind? Moderator Nikhil Seth, UN Institute for Training and Research, noted the distinction between countries left behind and peoples and groups left behind, while highlighting the lack of progress made on reducing inequality between countries.

Keynote speaker Lucas Chancel, World Inequality Lab, said ending extreme inequality directly shapes the ability to end extreme poverty. He identified taxation as a major challenge in reducing inequality, and worried that low corporate taxes were being balanced by taxing consumption on the middle class.

Presenting key messages from the regional forums on sustainable development, panelist Alicia Bárcena, UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, speaking on behalf of the five UN Regional Commissions, said regions such as the Asia-Pacific and Africa are not on track to achieve the SDGs. She identified high unemployment and high wealth inequality as challenges for Latin America; and urged addressing the needs of refugees and migrants in the Arab world.

Panelist Jarkko Turunen, International Monetary Fund, said many countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are expected to reach the SDG target on eradicating extreme poverty by 2030, but some need additional investments in health, education, and infrastructure.

Panelist Stephen Chacha, Tanzania Data Lab, noted that 21 African countries have achieved medium or high levels of human development; and “huge” data gaps exist in African countries in areas such as environment, public statistics, and disaggregated data on marginalized populations.

Panelist Sarah Charles, International Rescue Committee, said fragile states are off-track when it comes to achieving the SDGs. She noted that only 15 VNRs have mentioned migrants or refugees, and highlighted the lack of data on these marginalized populations.

Lead discussant George Khoury, National Association for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Lebanon, said people with disabilities have not been adequately included in SDG implementation; and recommended system-wide investments in supporting the integration and participation of people with disabilities into society.

In the discussion that followed, the EU announced support for marginalized populations affected by climate change as a priority. FINLAND called for gender income parity, saying women earn only 70 cents for each dollar earned by men. ETHIOPIA called for assistance for developing countries to curb illicit financial flows. NIGERIA said technology and infrastructure inequality among countries should be tackled. The INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS urged aligning business models with the SDGs, improving workers’ rights, strengthening the informal economy, and creating safe working environments.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES said forest eviction, criminalization of communities, conflicts in indigenous territories, and exclusion in resource management are contributing to leaving indigenous peoples behind. BAHAMAS highlighted the need to create new national mechanisms for data collection; and to address the challenges faced by small island developing states (SIDS) in the Caribbean that have newly-graduated to middle-income status. CHILDREN AND YOUTH called for globally-agreed frameworks to end privatisation of gains and socialisation of risks, and an ambitious HLPF review process. The WORKING GROUP OF EXPERTS ON PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT said the legacy of colonialism and slavery could compromise the goal of leaving no one behind.

In conclusion, panelists highlighted the need for: a commitment to include refugees and displaced persons in national plans; making improvements in public spending and fiscal policies; a multilateral pact to reduce tax evasion; and needs assessment to fill data gaps.

Review of SDG Implementation and Interrelations among Goals

Discussion on SDG 4 (quality education): This session was moderated by Henrietta Fore, UN Children’s Fund, who called for more equitable and efficient investments in education.

Presenting on the progress made, Shashwat Sapkota, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, described a “global learning crisis”, with a low proficiency rate amongst school children in reading and mathematics despite increased enrollment rates, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Panelist John McLaughlin, Deputy Minister, Education and Early Childhood Development, Canada, identified gender as a central focus for education, and highlighted Canada’s approach to target gender issues through aid.

Panelist Stefania Giannini, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, said achieving SDG 4 is no longer just about education reform, but about transforming the mindset with which we currently approach learning and teaching, to: make educational systems inclusive; and integrate the vision of SDGs, including global citizenship and sustainability, in curricula.

Lead discussant Susan Hopgood, Education International, said SDG 4 cannot be achieved unless governments “dramatically improve” working conditions for teachers.

In a discussion, ALGERIA highlighted the importance of SDG 4 to achieving SDG 2 (zero hunger) and SDG 3 (good health and well-being). The EU mentioned the role of the aid effectiveness principles in advancing progress on SDG 4. ISRAEL presented a national programme aimed at incentivizing the participation of girls in STEM education. FINLAND announced national reforms to the education system to support adult needs for lifelong learning.

FRANCE highlighted international modules developed to support educational institutions in 68 countries. ARGENTINA reported on the Group of Friends for Education and Lifelong Learning, launched by Permanent Representatives to the UN on the International Day of Education on 24 January 2019, to advocate for achieving SDG 4 globally.

The US called for support of expression of cultural identity in education; opposed the restrictions of Uyghur language by the Chinese government, and indoctrination in internment camps of these communities; and lamented the lack of Ukrainian language schools in “occupied Crimea.” The RUSSIAN FEDERATION said that 99% of its students are covered by general education and that Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar languages are taught in schools. CHINA noted that it has invested USD 500 billion in education and strongly opposed the US’ “abuse” and politicization of the HLPF. He said people in Xinjiang are guaranteed rights including freedom of religious belief and questioned the credibility of the US’ comments, and urged the US to respect facts and stop intervening in China’s internal affairs. The PHILIPPINES reported progress in keeping learners in school, despite drop-outs due to illness and disability among children, and marriage and family matters among older students. THAILAND reported on an equitable education fund aimed at reducing drop-out rates in secondary schools, and a digital platform to trace children at risk of dropping out of school.

SWITZERLAND highlighted quality free public education for children, which allows transition into apprenticeships or higher education. NORWAY highlighted aid programmes targeting education for marginalized groups worldwide. PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES called for system changes, such as universal design approaches, that facilitate access to education.

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSEXUAL, AND INTERSEX stakeholders stressed the importance of lifelong learning and a commitment to local and indigenous languages for inclusive learning environments.

Panelist Sheikha Hind bint Hamad Al Thani, Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, underscored the importance of a personalized approach to education.

Panelist Kazuhiro Yoshida, Co-Chair, SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, called for a system of support for teachers to create an enabling environment for learning.

Lead discussant Maria José Monge, Fundación Monge, highlighted crosscutting structural barriers in education in Costa Rica such as concentration of resources in urban areas, lack of continuous learning and teaching methods, and unequal teacher training.

Lead discussant Madeleine Zúñiga, Global Campaign for Education, stressed the importance of addressing diversity to increase the quality of education and cautioned that private education may further exacerbate inequality.

In the discussion that followed, SWEDEN highlighted the importance of education to advance gender equality and reduce gender violence. TURKEY and FINLAND emphasized the need to ensure inclusion of vulnerable groups in the educational system. IRAN said all refugee children are integrated in its national public educational system. REPUBLIC OF KOREA observed that SDG 4 does not receive the attention it deserves at UN Headquarters. BELIZE, for the ALLIANCE OF SMALL ISLAND STATES, emphasized the need for international partnerships to help SIDS advance with STEM education. BELGIUM highlighted that education for global citizenship is essential, given the increasing interconnectedness of the world. ETHIOPIA called for infrastructure investments in LDCs.

SPAIN described an “Education for Development” national prize to incentivize innovation in education. MEXICO highlighted the importance of vocational training for achieving SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). The UN ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME emphasized the need for: interdisciplinarity in formal and informal education; creating green jobs; and greening campuses. The SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL COMMUNITY called for investments in scientific and technological education. UK presented national programmes advancing SDG 4 implementation. INDONESIA showcased national training programmes for teachers.

The DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO called for support for developing countries to build schooling facilities. TIMOR-LESTE presented efforts to reduce inequalities related to the quality of education between municipalities. The UNITED ARAB EMIRATES noted the need for holistic educational systems. MOROCCO reported that all public school teachers in her country have secure public service contracts. CHILDREN AND YOUTH called for education that enables adaptation to climate change.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES said culturally sensitive information should be included in core curricula of schools. The WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANIZATION reported on the Accessible Books Consortium, aimed at increasing the number of books accessible to persons with print disabilities.

In conclusion, panelists: noted that education is a key driver for all SDGs; urged for increased partnerships, and funding for the sector; and called for the improvement of conditions for teachers.

In the Corridors

As delegates gathered to take stock of four years of implementing the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, a consistent message emerged during the day: the world is not moving fast enough to meet the SDGs. While the SDG Progress Report, presented in the morning, found a number of improvements, critical challenges remain. Speakers offered potential solutions: more courage, empowerment, inclusivity, and equality.

A few delegates welcomed the new meeting format which has shorter panel interventions, and hopefully, more time for discussion. As a further interactive element, online polls were administered throughout the day with participants identifying various topics they wished to tackle at the session: inequality topped the list followed by climate change and education.

With the room at capacity for the entire day, a delegate said there was clear interest in this year’s review of the SDGs. The atmosphere even became politically charged in the afternoon as some countries criticized each other’s policies. A veteran observer hoped that politics will be kept out for the remainder of the meeting so that the delegates can “keep their eye on what really matters”: the wide gap between the SDGs and the level of current achievement.

