

HLPF 2020 Highlights: Tuesday, 7 July 2020

The 2020 meeting of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), which is mandated to review the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and assess progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), opened on Tuesday, 7 July 2020. This year, the meeting is being held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following opening remarks, a session on “Launching the decade of action at a time of crisis: Keeping the focus on the SDGs while combating COVID-19” took place in the morning, in two parts: progress on SDGs, regional dimensions, and countries at different levels of development including middle-income countries (MICs); and 2020 targets, data, and institutions for integrated policy-making.

In the afternoon, another two-part session was held, on “Building back better after COVID-19 and acting where we will have the greatest impact on the SDGs.” The first part focused on protecting and advancing human well-being and ending poverty, while the second part focused on ending hunger and achieving food security. The day ended with a discussion on “Transformative pathways to realize the 2030 Agenda: A whole of society approach taking into account the impact of COVID-19 (Stakeholder perspective).”

Opening Session

Mona Juul, Permanent Representative of Norway and President, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), opened the meeting. She said this is a crucial HLPF meeting which can be a springboard towards rebuilding from COVID-19 and moving the world forward towards the SDGs.

Mher Margaryan, Permanent Representative of Armenia and ECOSOC Vice-President, presented messages from the Integration Segment of ECOSOC, which took place on Monday, 6 July. He called for viewing the pandemic as a historic opportunity to launch transformative pathways within the guiding framework of the 2030 Agenda; and urged building on linkages with SDGs to end poverty and rebuild inclusive societies that are resilient to future pandemics and other crises.

Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, presented the UN Secretary-General’s report on

progress towards the SDGs. He emphasized that while progress was uneven before the pandemic, COVID-19 has had considerable adverse impacts that disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable. He called for increased multilateralism and international cooperation, a comprehensive multilateral response cumulatively amounting to at least 10% of GDP globally, and additional financial resources for developing countries.

Keynote speaker Jutta Urpilainen, EU Commissioner for International Cooperation, highlighted calls for a global recovery initiative linking investment and debt relief through the implementation of the SDGs, and urged delegates to join. She called for a green, just, digital, and resilient recovery.

Keynote speaker Victor Harison, African Union Commissioner for Economic Affairs, underscored five pillars for achieving the SDGs in Africa: agriculture, infrastructure, energy, industry, and digitalization, as well as financing for these pillars.

Launching the decade of action at a time of crisis: Keeping the focus on the SDGs while combating COVID-19

Progress on SDGs, regional dimensions and countries at different levels of development including middle-income countries: This session was moderated by Manish Bapna, World Resources Institute. Setting the context for the discussion, Bapna pointed to: the uncertainties surrounding the duration and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; the inequities caused by it; and the urgency of ensuring that responses are transformative.

Resource person Jaouad Mahjour, World Health Organization (WHO), said the pandemic had caused more than 11 million reported cases and 530,000 deaths, disrupted routine healthcare systems across the world, and caused negative impacts across sectors and SDGs. Among the lessons learned, he listed the need for continuous investments in health services, and close cooperation between countries.

Resource person Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Africa and Coordinator of Regional Commissions, said the pandemic demonstrated that existing GDP-based country classifications are not applicable in every situation, as MICs and small island states reliant on sectors like tourism and oil production were severely affected, irrespective of their income levels. She noted the need to: revive economic sectors and build back better; address

inequalities to leave no one behind; and address current volatility and uncertainty without resorting to austerity.

Bapna agreed, quoting John Maynard Keynes: “the difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas, as in escaping old ones.”

Resource person Mariana Mazzucato, University College London, pointed to: “too much short-termism” in the business community, with profits not invested back in critical areas needed to achieve the SDGs; and weakened state capacity, further hollowed out by the pandemic and by climate change. She called for: recognition of the true value of health services; ensuring that recovery packages are invested back into societies instead of tax havens; and ensuring that the medical patent system is not abused.

Lead discussant Mohamed Boudra, Mayor of City of Al Hoceima, Morocco, for the Local Authorities Major Group, called for strengthening public service delivery systems and localizing sustainable development.

Ministerial respondent Pilar Garrido, Minister of National Planning and Economic Policy, Costa Rica, urged focusing financial support on tackling vulnerabilities and called for technology and data-driven policy interventions.

During the discussion, the Philippines, for the LIKE-MINDED GROUP OF COUNTRIES AND SUPPORTERS OF MICS, stressed the need for MICs to have access to recovery funds and programmes. Tuvalu, for the PACIFIC ISLAND FORUM, underlined the importance of personnel capacity in national planning, budgeting, and implementation. SWITZERLAND highlighted the importance of effective and accountable institutions and policies based on evidence and data. ALGERIA urged reallocating resources to strengthen international cooperation to tackle the health crisis. NEPAL called on participants to explore how immediate needs during the pandemic could be met while also pursuing long-term transformational change.

ROMANIA said most countries view the SDGs as an opportunity to reinvent themselves after the pandemic. ISRAEL called for recovery policies that maximize environmental benefits and prevent harmful lock-ins. The WOMEN’S MAJOR GROUP observed that the pandemic has exposed existing systemic inequalities, and impacts women disproportionately. NICARAGUA called for public debt relief for poor countries. FRANCE highlighted interlinkages between global issues, in particular health, climate change and biodiversity. The UK assured that clean and resilient recovery will be at the heart of the Presidency’s approach for the 2021 Climate Change Conference, hosted by the UK. The NETHERLANDS said COVID-19 has underscored the importance of international cooperation.

Moderator Bapna concluded by identifying three aspects of the SDGs crucial for building back better after the pandemic: leaving no one behind; integration; and universality.

2020 targets, data, and institutions for integrated policy-making: This session was moderated by Clare Melamed, Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data. She said effective

institutions are needed to convert data into policies that can drive progress towards the SDGs.

Resource person Ariunzaya Ayush, Co-Chair, High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda, called for increased investment in national data and statistical systems, and a new role for national statistical offices to meet the unprecedented data and statistics needs of the 2030 Agenda.

Resource person Geraldine Joslyn Fraser-Moleketi, Chair, Committee of Experts on Public Administration, underscored the need to re-imagine the role of institutions and of policy-making, and to promote new governance norms, instead of returning to pre-existing procedures and institutional cultures.

Highlighting the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on children and youth, resource person Henrietta Fore, Executive Director, UN International Children’s Fund, stressed the urgent need for online learning, and for scaling up digital connectivity to reach every child.

Lead discussant Jack Dangermond, Environmental Systems Research Institute, highlighted the potential of data visualization and mapping technology to raise awareness of SDG initiatives.

Lead discussant Maria Isabel León Klenke, Peru Employers Federation, said employers need flexible and business-friendly policies, reliable data, and policies that promote job creation.

Ministerial respondent Hala El Said, Minister of Planning, Monitoring and Administrative Reform, Egypt, outlined COVID-19 response and recovery measures taken by Egypt, including cash transfers to irregular workers, and called for effective international cooperation, expanded financial and technical assistance, and debt relief measures for low-income countries and MICs.

Respondent Joyce Msuya, Deputy Executive Director, UN Environment Programme, called for quantitative targets and monitoring to reverse land degradation and environmental deterioration.

During the discussion, GERMANY highlighted the importance of resilient health care systems and economic recovery guided by concern for the environment. TURKEY highlighted her country’s social protection programmes and urged strengthened multilateral cooperation. JAPAN emphasized the importance of universal health coverage and greater government transparency. FIJI said small island states need continued access to markets for economic recovery. GUATEMALA highlighted the importance of mobilizing finance that matches the needs of each phase of recovery.

CUBA highlighted his country’s role in assisting COVID-19 responses in other countries, and of South-South cooperation. The ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM (APRCM) said solidarity and system change are the only antidotes to the COVID-19 crisis. INDONESIA called for collaboration on the development and provision of a vaccine against COVID-19, and for social protection for the most vulnerable. POLAND said achieving the SDGs requires increasing funding to transform supply chain models. SOUTH AFRICA urged issuing IMF

Special Drawing Rights to expand liquidity and declaring vaccines as global public goods. IRAN lamented “illegal, unilateral, and extraterritorial sanctions.”

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA said the Korean New Deal consists of a digitalization component and a Green New Deal component, to align short-term recovery measures with the longer-term goal of transitioning to an inclusive, low-carbon economy. BELGIUM supported inviting the UN General Assembly to set out a process to ensure the 21 SDG targets that have a 2020 deadline are reviewed and updated if necessary. EGYPT called for ECOSOC to coordinate various initiatives in response to the pandemic. AFGHANISTAN called for attention to landlocked countries and countries facing security challenges, conflicts, or post-conflict situations.

Building back better after COVID-19 and acting where we will have the greatest impact on the SDGs

This session was chaired by Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative of Morocco and ECOSOC Vice-President. He said recovering from the pandemic and building back better will need stronger collaboration, cooperation, and dialogue among multiple stakeholders to ensure no one is left behind.

Protecting and advancing human well-being and ending poverty: Keynote speaker David Nabarro, WHO Special Envoy on COVID-19, described four main messages:

- COVID-19 is here to stay, and we will need to be able to live with the virus while maintaining economic and social progress.
- Identifying the most vulnerable people, and places where the virus is transmitted the most; strengthening public services; and designing integrated and local responses, will be key.
- The virus reveals existing weaknesses in current systems, such as the fragility of employment in the informal sector and weaknesses in food supply chains. The lessons from the pandemic should be heeded to address them.
- Dealing with the virus requires alignment with the 2030 Agenda and its principles.

Moderator Cristina Duarte, UN Secretary-General’s Special Advisor on Africa, highlighted the need for responses to incorporate human rights, close opportunity gaps, and build back institutions better to achieve good governance, as a precondition for better globalization.

Resource person Imme Scholz, German Development Institute, stressed the need to learn lessons from countries that have been able to reduce multi-dimensional poverty while keeping per capita greenhouse gas emissions low.

Resource person Githinji Gitahi, African Medical and Research Foundation, called for holistic accountability that places the voices of the people at the center of the voluntary national reviews (VNRs).

Highlighting the possibility of a dramatic increase in poverty, lead discussant Ilze Brands Kehris, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, called for adequate public investment and minimum employment guarantees.

Lead discussant Jane Miano, Stakeholder Group of Ageing / Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities, urged the inclusion

of persons with disabilities at all levels of decision-making, and empowering them as key agents of change in the recovery response.

During the interactive discussion, the CZECH REPUBLIC said dealing with the virus could provide insights into how to deal with climate change. PANAMA called for actively ensuring COVID-19 responses move the agenda forward on poverty eradication, healthcare, education, and public infrastructure. GUATEMALA said her country has reaffirmed food and nutrition as a fundamental national priority. Noting an unprecedented amount of public finance will be spent to address COVID-19, the EU called for effective investments that support a green and digital future. THAILAND stressed the need to: respond to the needs of all parts of society; ensure universal health coverage; and align recovery pathways with the SDGs. The NGO MAJOR GROUP highlighted, *inter alia*, human rights for all, transparency and access to information and data, and funding to initiatives that impact multiple SDGs. BOLIVIA identified the need to expand production of affordable food, address unequal food distribution worldwide, and cut food waste.

Ending hunger and achieving food security: Moderator Jomo Kwame Sundaram, former Assistant Director-General for Economic and Social Development, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), highlighted the need to address issues of implementation and knowledge and data gaps, and ensure that scientific and technological advances benefit all of humanity.

Resource person Endah Murniningtyas, Independent Group of Scientists for the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), said COVID-19 presents an opportunity to transform food systems and nutrition patterns, including through social protection, information technology, and shifting consumption patterns.

Resource person Bernard Lehmann, High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, called for policies that: promote a radical transformation of food systems; appreciate the link between food systems and other sectors; address hunger and malnutrition in all forms; and develop context-specific solutions taking into account local conditions and traditional knowledge.

Lead discussant Andrea Carmen, Indigenous Peoples Major Group, said the full participation of indigenous peoples, and respect for indigenous rights are essential for meeting SDG 2 targets.

Luis Bastera, Minister of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries, Argentina, called for placing the principles of cooperation and solidarity at the center of the global response.

Qu Dongyu, FAO Director-General, highlighted the importance of innovation, investments, and enabling policies to tackle hunger.

Gilbert F. Hounbo, President, International Fund for Agricultural Development, highlighted the need for a small-scale producers to have access to markets, financial services, and knowledge and training.

During the discussion, NICARAGUA called for a “major” redistributive effort to address the aftermath of the pandemic. FINLAND highlighted the role of multi-sectoral nutrition and health policies, and nexus approaches to fight hunger. NEPAL

said national-level efforts are not enough to tackle hunger and malnutrition, and called for a comprehensive and coordinated global effort. INDONESIA noted steps to stabilize food prices, improve quality of consumption, and invest in sustainable agricultural resources. SWITZERLAND said policies that adopt a sustainable food systems approach can play a major role in hunger prevention measures.

CHILE stressed the need to protect agricultural supply chains and adopt public policies in support of sustainable food systems. The APRCEM said industrial and livestock farming have produced devastating diseases including COVID-19, and smallholder farmers are suffering the impacts the most. FRANCE called for placing food security and nutrition at the center of the emergency response, and noted the role of the UN Secretary-General's 2021 Food Systems Summit's role in achieving this. The WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP warned that the COVID-19 crisis could double the number of people suffering from acute hunger globally, noting that 60% of the chronically hungry are women and girls. SWEDEN called for food system transformations based on the three dimensions of sustainability, gender equality, and equitable distribution of resources. COSTA RICA urged making food systems more resilient and inclusive.

In conclusion, Murniningtyas emphasized the importance of science, technology, and innovation in agriculture. Lehmann called for making existing voluntary commitments under the Committee on World Food Security more binding. Sundaram identified divergence among participants on the role and ownership of technologies, the roles of private and public sectors, and research.

Transformative pathways to realize the 2030 Agenda: A whole of society approach taking into account the impact of COVID-19 (Stakeholder perspective)

Chairing the session, ECOSOC President Juul said Major Groups and other Stakeholders play a key role in the joint effort to achieve the SDGs by raising awareness, tracking progress, holding governments accountable, and catalyzing implementation.

Moderator Maria Theresa Nera-Lauron, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, called for a just and equitable transition, saying "although we are all in the same boat, some are in first class while others are below deck and others are even further below."

Resource person Haaziq Kazi, Grade 8 student, Indus International School Pune, on behalf of the Major Group of Children and Youth, called for rethinking the economic systems that underpin the current form of globalization with continued exploitation of labor and ecology, and said the greatest barrier to progress is not the lack of solutions but rather our love of models that have proven their insufficiency in the face of current realities.

Resource person Limota Limotat Goroso Giwa, Huairou Commission, called for implementing policies to address inclusion of grassroots women in COVID-19 recovery policies, and care and support women at the grassroots.

Resource person Refat Sabbah, Global Campaign for Education, said the pandemic has uncovered the need for the 2030 Agenda to address justice and equality.

Resource person Alessandrabree Chacha, LGBTI Stakeholder Group, said shrinking space for civil society has impacted the safety and security of marginalized populations.

Lead discussant Rilli Lappalainen, for the Finnish Development NGOs speaking on behalf of Finland, called for a systematic approach for a transformation towards sustainability.

During the discussion, MEXICO said progress on sustainable development does not have to come at the cost of protecting human rights. NICARAGUA urged politicians to take corrective actions to redistribute wealth. A youth delegate from NORWAY called for freedom of expression and an invitation to youth to engage on the 2030 Agenda. SWITZERLAND noted uneven progress on the SDGs and called for multi-stakeholder collaboration. SWEDEN expressed commitment to ensuring that stakeholders' voices are heard in the HLPF, saying "when civic spaces close, inequality becomes less visible."

The NGO MAJOR GROUP said spaces are being closed to civil society either "out of a sense of threat" or "fear based on mistrust," and asked how this impasse could be overcome. The WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP said COVID-19 provides an opportunity to rethink exploitative labor practices and to put in place education systems that promote gender equality. APRCEM suggested some governments are using the pandemic as a justification to clamp down on civil society engagement.

Moderator Nera-Lauron concluded by noting the session had highlighted the need for an intersectional approach to unlock the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda.

In the Cyber-Corridors

It was business un-usual at the HLPF. This is one of the few major UN meetings that is taking place this year as originally scheduled – albeit virtually – instead of being postponed due to COVID-19. While locally based Permanent Representatives were at UN Headquarters in New York, most other participants joined them from different parts of the world. Inevitable minor technical hiccups ensued, but most of them got to have their say. Almost without exception, they seemed to concur that the virus is an opportunity to build back better, and the 2030 Agenda and SDGs are the perfect framework for this.

Undertones, however, were not so consonant, with different versions of what "better" constitutes. Some emphasized debt relief for developing countries. Others highlighted public-private partnerships. Some underscored environment as an important consideration. Others were more focused on social protection. Under the buzz of agreement, it seems, historic fissures are deep and well. A virtual viewer wondered if the widely heard rhetoric on urgent, transformational change would in fact lead to business un-usual implementation.