

HLPF 2020 Highlights: Tuesday, 14 July 2020

The High-level Segment of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Ministerial Segment of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) opened on Tuesday morning, with remarks from the UN Secretary-General and the President of the UN General Assembly (UNGA). The Prime Minister of Finland delivered a keynote address, followed by statements from youth representatives.

In the afternoon, the President of the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA 5) delivered key messages from UNEA; and the President of the Latin America and Caribbean Forum of Ministers presented a message from his region.

The presentation of voluntary national reviews (VNRs) resumed in the morning and continued into the afternoon, with eight countries presenting. Finland presented a VNR for the second time, while Bulgaria, the Russian Federation, Burundi, the Gambia, Brunei Darussalam, the Federated States of Micronesia, and North Macedonia presented VNRs for the first time.

Opening of the High-level Segment of ECOSOC / Ministerial Segment of HLPF

Mona Juul, ECOSOC President and Permanent Representative of Norway, opened the session, calling on Member States to take action in areas that will have the greatest impact, including expanding social protection programmes, strengthening health systems, and responding to the economic shock.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres attributed the devastating impact of COVID-19 to past and present failures in: taking the SDGs seriously; addressing inequalities; investing in resilience; empowering women and girls; heeding warnings about the damage to the natural environment; addressing climate change; and valuing international cooperation and solidarity. The awakening provided by the current crisis could be a chance to create an inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism, he said.

UNGA President Tijjani Muhammad-Bande warned that the “decade of action” has become a “decade of recovery,” and called for the SDGs to be at the forefront of government strategies for recovery, to safeguard communities against future shocks.

Sanna Marin, Prime Minister of Finland, identified the European Green Deal and the Nordic blueprint for building back better and greener as essential roadmaps for recovery. As positive developments in the HLPF, she noted the proactive role of cities, the engagement of the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action, and the UN’s emphasis on digital cooperation.

Youth representatives Farai Lwandile Mubaiwa, Africa Matters Initiative, and Tina Hocevar, European Youth Forum, identified four “pandemics” requiring urgent intervention: COVID-19, femicide, racism, and climate change. They called for safety nets for youth to prevent a “lockdown generation,” no bailouts for polluters, and replacing GDP with integrative values of human rights, health, human well-being, and the well-being of our planet.

Keynote by the UNEA President and a Regional Message

ECOSOC President Juul chaired the session. In his keynote address, Sveinung Rotevatn, UNEA 5 President and Minister of Climate and Environment, Norway, relayed 13 messages from the UNEA to the HLPF, including: the importance of nature as an enabler of sustainable development; a call for ambitious environmental negotiations on the post-2020 biodiversity framework and the sound management of chemicals and waste; strengthened action on ecosystem-based approaches; and the need for innovative pathways for sustainable consumption and production.

Presenting a message from his region, Trevor Prescod, President of the Latin America and Caribbean Forum of Ministers and Minister of Environment and National Beautification, Barbados, said the pandemic has led to the biggest drop in regional GDP in a century and pushed 16 million people into conditions of extreme poverty. He called on countries to put in place health and environment surveillance systems and a resource mobilization framework to generate investments.

Voluntary National Reviews

The VNR presentations were chaired by ECOSOC President Juul in the morning, and Mher Margaryan, Permanent Representative of Armenia and ECOSOC Vice-President in the afternoon.

Presenting the second VNR for **Finland**, Prime Minister Sanna Marin highlighted: the incorporation of a parallel independent SDG progress assessment by civil society into the national VNR report; a peer VNR dialogue conducted with Mozambique and Switzerland; Voluntary Local Reviews by three Finnish cities; and Finland’s carbon neutrality target for 2035. As challenges, she identified: consumption and production patterns; climate change; biodiversity; gender-based violence and the pay gap; and discrimination against minorities and persons with disabilities.

Responding to questions from SWEDEN, SWITZERLAND, NORWAY, ROMANIA, COSTA RICA, and INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, Krista Mikkonen, Minister of the Environment and Climate Change, said: Finland’s National Commission on Sustainable Development includes 60 stakeholders and is chaired by the Prime Minister; sustainable development budgeting includes

a focus on climate neutrality and harmful subsidies; the country's 2030 Agenda Youth Group's function is to spur the government to implementation; and the government is committed to respecting the rights of the Sámi people.

Presenting the first VNR for **Bulgaria**, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov noted progress on: the proportion of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; increasing the share of renewable energy; and improving public finances. Among challenges, he listed regional disparities, an aging population, poverty, social exclusion, a shortage of qualified employees and digital skills, and the lack of a national coordination mechanism.

In response to questions from ARGENTINA, INDONESIA, BOTSWANA, and CHILDREN AND YOUTH, Borisov highlighted: measures to protect vulnerable groups from the impact of COVID-19, including financial support to micro-enterprises and businesses of persons with disabilities; mobile care units for older people; economic support to businesses to preserve jobs; education system reforms; policies to ensure a favorable environment for business and technology development; and initiatives to improve the water supply.

Presenting the first VNR for the **Russian Federation**, Dmitry Chumakov, Deputy Permanent Representative, highlighted achievements, including: the eradication of extreme poverty, with 12.6% still below the national poverty threshold; subsidies to increase housing opportunities and promote balanced regional development; COVID-19 recovery measures, such as a three-fold increase in unemployment benefits; and the formulation of a comprehensive national plan for modernizing infrastructure.

Responding to questions from INDIA, KYRGYZSTAN, NGOs, and CHINA, Chumakov highlighted: ongoing work to launch a clean technologies platform for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS); efforts to improve access to transport in rural areas for improved connectivity; and the involvement of 20 different organizations in the preparation of Russia's VNR.

Presenting the first VNR of **Burundi**, Denise Sinankwa, Economic and Social Council of Burundi, highlighted: integration of the SDGs into sectoral and national development plans; progress in provision of free education and healthcare, and safe drinking water; and challenges in data gathering and mobilization of domestic and international finance. She noted plans to improve energy access, create resilient investment opportunities, and ensure the green economy becomes a source of decent job creation.

Sinankwa responded to questions from TANZANIA and WORKERS AND TRADE on: the impact of COVID-19 on Burundi's goal to reduce maternal mortality; plans to ensure transparent sharing of up-to-date, disaggregated data; climate change policies and actions; and the inclusion of civil society in the implementation of the SDGs.

Presenting the first VNR for **the Gambia**, Mambury Njie, Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs, highlighted: challenges including debt sustainability; a fiscal deficit heightened by COVID-19; coastal erosion; low levels of investment in science, technology, and innovation; and data availability. He noted progress including the creation of a ministry for women, children and social welfare, and drafting anti-corruption legislation.

In response to questions from MOROCCO and CHILDREN AND YOUTH, Njie underscored the establishment of a pilot programme in 75 communities aimed at addressing disparities between urban

and rural areas regarding access to basic services, and said his government will continue to deepen private sector engagement and mobilize private sector resources.

The first VNR for **Brunei Darussalam** reported on efforts to diversify the economy, with 22.2% growth in the non-oil and gas sectors between 2010-2019; the launch of a digital welfare system designed to lift welfare recipients out of poverty; and the formation of a digital economy council, master plan, and 5G taskforce.

Presenting the first VNR of the **Federated States of Micronesia**, President David W. Panuelo, with other delegates, highlighted: traditional practices and knowledge, and protection of natural heritage as values underpinning the country's development plan; work to mainstream climate change into all policies; support for women's participation in decision-making; and commitment to the rule of law and equal opportunities for all. He said the government is implementing health and social protection measures to build national resilience to COVID-19 and to support gender and social equality.

Presenting the first VNR for **North Macedonia**, Mila Carovska, Deputy Prime Minister, with other delegates, said her country has four priority Goals for 2018-2020: SDG 1 (no poverty); SDG 4 (quality education); SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); SDG 13 (climate action); and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). They further underscored the importance of: continuing targeted efforts to reduce poverty; investing in quality education and employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, including to prevent brain drain; reforming the social protection system; continuing efforts to combat corruption; supporting women entrepreneurs; and improving air quality and crisis preparedness.

In response to questions from SLOVENIA, COSTA RICA, MONTENEGRO, and NGOs, North Macedonia highlighted a new law on women's right to decide on the termination of pregnancy; successful partnerships with various stakeholders on SDG implementation; the de-institutionalization of children in care; and a new law to combat discrimination.

In the Cyber-Corridors

Technology works, at least for those who have access to it... until it doesn't. After relative smooth-sailing last week, the virtual HLPF session on Tuesday morning was plagued by technical problems. As a result, the usually rushed VNRs were even more chaotic. One country was unable to present its VNR in the morning as scheduled due to audio failure, and the Q&A sessions of other VNRs were interrupted, resulting in an impromptu "technical break." Audio was eventually restored, but the quality kept fading and disrupting interpretation for other VNRs. The world is being rushed into digitalization, but it seems this can create challenges for even the most tech-savvy.

Fortunately, technical problems did not interrupt the UN Secretary-General's clear and stern warning to the global community that COVID-19 could set us back years and even decades, leaving countries with massive fiscal and growth challenges at a time when a "leap ahead" is desperately needed. This was a cold reminder of why the HLPF is taking place virtually, and the urgency of its mission. The world cannot go back to the "previous so-called normal," Guterres warned. It is time to take the 2030 Agenda and SDGs seriously, and use them as a framework to respond and recover better.