

HLPF 2020 Highlights: Wednesday, 15 July 2020

A session on messages from the UN regions in the morning was followed by the presentation of ten voluntary national reviews (VNRs) on Wednesday. Estonia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Austria, Seychelles, Syrian Arab Republic, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Mozambique, and Papua New Guinea presented their VNRs for the first time.

Messages from the Regions

Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative of Morocco and Vice-President of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), chaired this session. Moderator Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Africa, and Coordinator of Regional Commissions, reported mixed progress across the regions, and highlighted the role of civil society in the work of regional platforms.

Presenting messages from the sixth session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development which took place in February 2020, Paul Mavima, Minister of Public Service, Labor and Social Welfare, Zimbabwe, said that while the region made modest progress in some areas such as peace, justice, and strong institutions and reduced inequalities, it was grappling with challenges that impede progress, including disease, poverty, climate emergencies, wars, youth unemployment, and fragile social systems. He further noted that in the aftermath of the pandemic, the GDP growth rate for Africa is predicted to slow from 3.2% to 1.8% or even negative figures, according to some forecasts.

Presenting messages from the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region based on virtual meetings, Rodrigo Malmeirca, Minister of Foreign Trade and Foreign Investment, Cuba, noted low economic performance and growing levels of indebtedness in the region as key challenges. He said the region is projected to suffer the worst GDP growth contraction in its history as a result of the pandemic, of -5.3%. He called for renewed and strengthened multilateralism, and respect for state sovereignty and self-determination, while rejecting unilateral measures.

Presenting messages for the Western Asia region from recent regional meetings, Lolwah Al-Khater, Assistant Foreign Minister, Qatar, highlighted the need to: build national statistical capacities for disaggregated and quality data; mainstream gender equality; encourage multistakeholder partnerships; enhance accountability, including through partnerships with civil society; and recognize the independence of think tanks and research centers.

Presenting messages for Europe, Vaqif Sadiqov, Chair of the fourth session of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UN Economic Commission for Europe, which took place virtually, said not a single country in the region is fully on track to achieve all the SDGs. Among challenges and priorities, he listed: engaging youth, innovators, businesses, and cities; utilizing finance and technology to boost green products and services; and redirecting

financial flows towards circular growth, carbon neutrality, and nature-based solutions.

Presenting for the Asia-Pacific region, Samantha K. Jayasuriya, Chair of the seventh session of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, which took place virtually, noted the importance of: multistakeholder partnerships; openness and transparency on the causes and impacts of COVID-19; and new and transformative ways of working that prioritize sustainability.

In the discussion, the DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO noted her country's commitment to finding a balance between economic development and environmental protection. ETHIOPIA called for an analysis of the impacts and challenges caused by COVID-19 in the regional forum reports. WOMEN underscored the need for allocating adequate resources for the health sector, and accelerating decarbonization and access to clean energy. CUBA highlighted the development of a COVID-19 Observatory in the LAC region, for information and analysis on the health, economic, and social impacts of the pandemic.

Voluntary National Reviews

This session was chaired by Mher Margaryan, Permanent Representative of Armenia and ECOSOC Vice-President, and ECOSOC Vice-President Hilale in the morning; and Juan Sandoval, Permanent Representative of Mexico and ECOSOC Vice-President, in the afternoon.

Presenting the first VNR for **Estonia**, Sven Jürgenson, Permanent Representative of Estonia, reported progress in education and renewable energy, and challenges in waste management, climate change mitigation, biodiversity, gender equality, and disability. He highlighted the effectiveness of digital technologies in increasing energy efficiency.

In response to questions from AUSTRIA, FINLAND, SLOVENIA, ECUADOR, and CHILDREN AND YOUTH, Jürgenson noted a rise in greenhouse gas emissions intensity, and a decline in the species diversity index. He described efforts to ensure digitalization did not disadvantage particular groups.

Presenting the first VNR for **Ukraine**, Olha Stefanishyna, Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, with the Director General, Policy Planning in the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers, highlighted: a recent Cabinet decision to treat the SDGs as a policy benchmark; ongoing efforts to integrate the SDGs into budgetary and planning processes; and progress in 15 SDGs, including poverty reduction, higher wages, and increased housing.

Responding to questions by ESTONIA, LITHUANIA, GEORGIA, FINLAND, LATVIA, the RUSSIAN FEDERATION, and WOMEN, Ukraine described: the introduction of information and communication technologies to improve public services; consultations with NGOs and youth on policy decisions; and ongoing civil service reform.

Presenting the first VNR for **Uzbekistan**, Tanzila Narbaeva, Chair of the Senate, and Jamshid Kuchkarov, Deputy Prime Minister, highlighted progress in: the adoption of a national SDG tracking framework; the role of the Parliament in overseeing reforms; gender

equality; reporting by the Ministry of Finance on the SDGs; and measures to reduce corruption, improve the investment environment, and support entrepreneurial activities. For further improvements, they identified: statistical capacity; effectiveness of the public administration; structural reforms to strengthen the market economy; and the coverage and quality of education.

In response to questions from KAZAKHSTAN, TAJIKISTAN, AZERBAIJAN, BELARUS, and KYRGYZSTAN, the delegation highlighted: the adoption of a national strategy on human rights that integrates the SDGs; a national action plan for implementing the Paris Agreement on climate change; the Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea Region; and involvement of sub-national regions in implementing the SDGs.

Presenting the VNR for **Austria**, Karoline Edstadler, Federal Minister for the European Union and Constitution, highlighted three focus areas: digitalization, including expansion of digital infrastructure, digital skills training, and digital access to government services; leaving no one behind, with a focus on women, youth, and persons with disabilities; and climate action, including through the Green Finance Agenda.

In response to questions from ESTONIA, BHUTAN, SWITZERLAND, COSTA RICA, and EDUCATION AND ACADEMIA, Edstadler highlighted: the need to address the digital divide; the national goal to move entirely to renewable electricity and ensure decarbonization of the heating sector by 2040; and a collaboration between the Parliaments of Austria and Zambia to strengthen democratic institutions.

Presenting the first VNR for **Seychelles**, Maurice Loustau-Lalanne, Minister of Finance, Trade, and Economic Planning, highlighted: attainment of high-income status; broad provision of health care and education opportunities; issuance of “blue bonds” to support marine protected areas; and the need for economic diversification, away from tourism.

Responding to questions from the UK, UN RESIDENT COORDINATOR FOR SEYCHELLES, and MAJOR GROUPS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS, Loustau-Lalanne noted: great interest in the blue bonds; designation of 30% of the country’s exclusive economic zone as marine protected areas; establishment of a human rights commission; and the integration of the SDGs into the rolling five-year national strategy.

The first VNR of the **Syrian Arab Republic** highlighted: a commitment to national reconciliation; prioritization of the return of internally displaced persons and refugees; a post-war national development programme containing the Syria 2030 plan which integrates the SDGs; and an economic plan through 2030 based on four phases, namely relief, resilience, recovery, and sustainability. A video presentation stated that, due to the war, agriculture has shrunk by 23%, and 28% of Syrians face food insecurity.

Responding to questions from CHINA, the RUSSIAN FEDERATION, and NGOs, Emad Sabouni, Minister and Head of the Planning and International Cooperation Commission, said: “unilateral coercive measures” in the form of trade restrictions have impacted the economy, infrastructure, and livelihoods; the focus of UN agencies had shifted to responding to humanitarian needs during the war, but a renewed role in supporting economic and social development is now welcomed; and the VNR process was participatory, involving civil society, the academia, and parliamentarians.

Presenting the first VNR for **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines**, Camillo Gonsalves, Minister of Finance, Economic Planning, Sustainable Development, and Information Technology, highlighted progress on: maternal mortality; access to secondary education; reduction of HIV transmission; increased access to electricity; clean water and sanitation services; and reduction of gender-based inequalities. He called for development finance, technology transfer, capacity building, cooperative partnerships, and genuine systemic reform or sustainable development will remain “illusory.”

In response to questions from SAINT LUCIA, JAMAICA, the NETHERLANDS, and CHILDREN AND YOUTH, Gonsalves

said his country is spending an unsustainable amount to deal with climate-related disasters which is still insufficient, and the USD 100 billion annually by 2020 promised by the global community is still not available. He called the mechanisms created to deliver international finance as “not fit for purpose.”

Presenting the first VNR for **Trinidad and Tobago**, Pernelle Beckles, Permanent Representative to the UN, highlighted progress in: reducing maternal and under-five mortality rates; increasing the representation of women in Parliament; and the integration of eight priority SDGs into policy frameworks. She noted a multi-dimensional approach to financial and economic measures to minimize the impacts of the economic contraction from COVID-19. Highlighting the results of a civil society shadow report on the SDGs and climate change, Nicole Leotaud, Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, identified the need to accelerate action in many areas.

Responding to questions from JAMAICA and BELIZE, Beckles noted the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, including declining energy prices and reduced tourism, and highlighted the establishment of a recovery roadmap committee.

Presenting the first VNR for **Mozambique**, António Gumende, Permanent Representative to the UN, reported progress in: poverty and maternal mortality reduction; gender parity in education and women’s representation in government; electricity access; and climate change adaptation and resilience planning. He said Mozambique adopted best practices in: food security governance; fisheries management; resilient infrastructure; and institutionalization of stakeholder dialogues.

In response to questions from FINLAND, ZIMBABWE, NGOs, and PORTUGAL, Mozambique noted: a multistakeholder VNR coordination group; measures to protect vulnerable groups; the importance of pursuing economic diversification for improved distributive effects; and the need to reinforce statistical capacity.

Presenting the VNR for **Papua New Guinea**, James Marape, Prime Minister, reported significant progress across many SDGs, including on improving transport connectivity, health, education, community development, life expectancy, maternal and infant mortality, literacy, and reducing extreme poverty. He noted the challenge of reducing widening inequalities.

In response to questions from AUSTRALIA, INDIA, NEW ZEALAND, and the ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM, Sam Basil, Minister for National Planning and Monitoring, said his country will continue to prioritize transport connectivity, the rollout of electrification, supporting small and medium enterprises, and agriculture. He described economic stimulus measures adopted as part of the COVID-19 response.

CHINA said the VNR process should focus on progress and challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda and should not be politicized.

In the Cyber-Corridors

The session on regional messages, efficiently chaired by a woman (all five UN regional commissions are currently led by women), presented a more vivid picture of the severe impacts of COVID-19 – particularly the reductions in GDP growth projections in the Africa and LAC regions. The “build back better and greener” advocates will have to take a harder look at local realities and come up with a more realistic plan to turn exhortations into action, observed a virtual viewer. Funds to implement sustainable development have always been an Achilles heel. SDG 17 was highlighted as “the most significant and transformative pillar of our shared agenda” by the Finance Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Without development finance, capacity building, technology transfer, fair and open trade, cooperative partnerships, and genuine systemic reform, he pointed out, “sustainable development will remain illusory, pursued diligently but never attained.”

The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* summary and analysis of the 2020 HLPF will be available on Monday, 20 July 2020, at <http://enb.iisd.org/hlpf/2020/>