

Summary of the 2020 Meeting of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: 7-16 July 2020

“The COVID-19 crisis is having devastating impacts because of our past and present failures, because we have yet to take the SDGs seriously,” UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the virtual meeting of the 2020 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

The meeting was originally intended to initiate a new four-year cycle to review the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and assess progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). Importantly, it was meant to launch a “decade of action and delivery” after the 2019 HLPF found progress on the SDGs was lagging. Instead, it ended up being a rather unusual session. In a year when the COVID-19 pandemic caused most multilateral meetings to be postponed, the HLPF session convened on the originally planned dates, but was held virtually.

Given the considerable impact of the pandemic on human health and the global economy, the meeting’s agenda was adjusted by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Bureau to focus on the potential impact of the pandemic on implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. Initial plans for the “thematic review” section of the HLPF were altered to focus on the impact of the pandemic, and on how the international community can respond to get back on track. The general debate that normally takes place during the Ministerial Segment was cancelled—instead, Heads of State and Government and ministers were invited to send written or recorded statements for posting on the ECOSOC and HLPF websites. Side events, exhibitions, and other special events also took place virtually. The overall theme of the meeting decided by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in November 2019 was, however, retained: “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: Realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.”

The meeting ended without adopting a ministerial declaration, contrary to expectations. Mona Juul, ECOSOC President, told the closing session that while an ambitious declaration was emerging, some issues still required discussion. Suggesting countries were close to an agreement, she encouraged all Member States to support its adoption by consensus. On Friday, 17 July, she circulated a revised draft ministerial declaration, noting if Member States raise no objection before 22 July, the declaration will be considered as adopted.

Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) were presented by 47 countries, with 26 presenting for the first time, 20 for the second time, and 1 for the third time. Countries were given the option of livestreaming their presentation, sending pre-recorded presentations, or mixing these two options. A limited number of questions (either asked via livestream or sent in

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advance to countries who chose to entirely pre-record their VNR presentations) were allowed at the end by Member States and other stakeholders.

“We were not on track to deliver when COVID-19 hit, and the road ahead is even steeper,” UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed said in her closing statement. “We can turn this around if we stay true to the 2030 Agenda.”

A Brief History of the HLPF

The HLPF was established in July 2013 by UNGA resolution 67/290 as the main forum for sustainable development issues within the UN. The HLPF is one of the main outcomes of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) and replaced the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), which was established at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit). The UNGA resolution calls on the HLPF to meet under the auspices of ECOSOC every year, and under the auspices of the UNGA every four years, to:

- provide political leadership, guidance, and recommendations for sustainable development;
- follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments;
- enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development; and
- have a focused, dynamic, and action-oriented agenda, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges.

In September 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Summit adopted “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” a package that includes the 17 SDGs, 169 targets, and a framework for follow-up and review of implementation. The 2030 Agenda calls on the HLPF to take on a central role in the follow-up and review process at the global level, and to carry out voluntary, state-led national reviews to provide a platform for partnerships.

Key Turning Points

First Session of the HLPF: The one-day inaugural session of the HLPF, on 24 September 2013, was held under the auspices of the UNGA, and followed the closing session of the CSD. Heads of State and Government articulated a number of concrete proposals on the role of the HLPF, which should include stakeholders, emphasize accountability, review the post-2015 development agenda and the implementation of the SDGs, and examine issues from scientific and local perspectives. There was general agreement on the need for a genuine balance between the three dimensions of sustainable development, and for the HLPF to seek to integrate these dimensions throughout the UN system.

2014 HLPF Session: The second HLPF session (30 June - 9 July 2014) featured numerous dialogues around the key theme of “Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and charting the way for an ambitious post-2015 development agenda including the SDGs.” As participants awaited the adoption of the post-2015 agenda, the Ministerial Declaration adopted at the end of the Forum focused on overcoming gaps identified in the implementation of the MDGs; and on reaffirming commitment to a strong, ambitious, inclusive, and people-centered post-2015 agenda.

2015 HLPF Session: The third session of the HLPF (26 June - 8 July 2015) was once again described as a “placeholder” meeting awaiting the adoption of the post-2015 agenda. It focused on “Strengthening integration, implementation and review—the

HLPF after 2015.” In addition to discussions on issues such as the future of the HLPF, supporting national action through HLPF outcomes, and keeping science involved in SDG implementation, the Ministerial Declaration called on the ECOSOC President to issue summaries of the discussions held during the Forum as a contribution to the upcoming Third International Conference on Financing for Development and the intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 agenda.

2016 HLPF Session: The fourth session of the HLPF (11-20 July 2016) was the first to take place after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. It was also the first session that included VNRs and 22 countries shared their experiences with the 2030 Agenda. This session was also the first where elements of the Ministerial Declaration were put to a vote. A controversial paragraph relating to the Paris Agreement on climate change remained intact following the vote.

2017 HLPF Session: In-depth reviews of the SDGs were initiated at this session (10-19 July 2017), focusing on six goals: SDG 1 (no poverty); SDG 2 (zero hunger); SDG 3 (good health and well-being); SDG 5 (gender equality); SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure); and SDG 14 (life below water). SDG 17 (partnerships) was also reviewed and would be reviewed annually during this first cycle. Forty-three countries presented VNRs. Once again, two elements of the Ministerial Declaration—relating to occupied territories and the multilateral trade system—were put to a vote. While the Declaration was adopted with both paragraphs receiving overwhelming support, a number of countries abstained from voting, protesting that the voting process itself diluted a strong political signal from the HLPF.

2018 HLPF Session: This session (9-18 July 2018) focused on the theme of “Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies.” Five goals were reviewed in addition to SDG 17: SDG 6 (water and sanitation); SDG 7 (energy); SDG 11 (sustainable cities); SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production); and SDG 15 (terrestrial ecosystems). Forty-six countries presented VNRs. A Ministerial Declaration was adopted, following a vote on the text as a whole, and specifically on means of implementation and global partnerships, peace and security, and gender equality.

2019 HLPF Session: The 2019 session (9-19 July 2019) completed the first four-year cycle of the HLPF. The key message from the meeting was that the global response to implementing the SDGs had not been ambitious enough, and a renewed commitment and accelerated action was needed to deliver the SDGs in time. The session focused on the theme of “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality.” Five SDGs were reviewed in addition to SDG 17: SDG 4 (quality education); SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); SDG 10 (reduced inequalities); SDG 13 (climate action); and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). VNRs were presented by 47 countries during the Ministerial Segment, with seven countries presenting for the second time.

SDG Summit: The SDG Summit (24-25 September 2019) was the first HLPF session to convene under the auspices of the UNGA since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. Heads of State and Government reviewed progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs, with just over a decade left to the target date of 2030. The Summit featured six “leaders dialogues” on: megatrends impacting the achievement of the SDGs; accelerating the achievement of the SDGs: critical entry points; measures to leverage progress across the SDGs; localizing the SDGs; partnerships for sustainable development; and the 2020-2030 vision. A political declaration was adopted during the opening

segment, on “Gearing up for a decade of action and delivery for sustainable development: political declaration of the Sustainable Development Goals Summit.”

HLPF 2020 Report

Mona Juul, Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN and ECOSOC President, opened the meeting on Tuesday, 7 July. She said this was a crucial HLPF meeting that could be a springboard towards rebuilding from COVID-19 and moving the world forward towards the SDGs.

Mher Margaryan, Permanent Representative of Armenia to the UN 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 the 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 the global gross domestic product (GDP), and additional financial resources for developing countries.

Keynote speaker Jutta Urpilainen, European Union (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

This session, on Tuesday, 7 July, included two parts: progress on the 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.

Progress on the SDGs, regional dimensions and countries at different levels of development including MICs: Moderator Manish Bapna, World Resources Institute, 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 over 530,000 deaths, disrupted routine healthcare systems across the world, and resulted in 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 tackle the 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 making sure that the medical patent system is not abused.

Lead discussant Mohamed Boudra, Mayor of Al Hoceïma, Morocco, speaking 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.

In the discussion, participants noted the need for, *inter alia*:

- MICs to have access to recovery funds and programmes;
- debt relief for poor countries;
- personnel capacity in national planning, budgeting, and implementation;
- effective and accountable institutions, and policies based on evidence and data;
- addressing immediate needs during the pandemic, while also pursuing long-term transformational change; and
- viewing the SDGs as an opportunity to reinvent systems and processes after the pandemic, while maximizing environmental benefits and preventing harmful lock-ins.

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

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3358e.html>

2020 targets, data, and institutions for integrated policy-making: Moderator Clare Melamed, Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, said effective institutions are needed to convert data into policies that can drive progress towards the SDGs.

Resource person Ariunzaya Ayush, 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, Committee of Experts on Public Administration, underscored the need to re-imagine the roles 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 (UNICEF), 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 her country, 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.

In the discussion, participants highlighted, *inter alia*:

- the importance of resilient healthcare systems and universal health coverage;
- economic recovery guided by concern for the environment;
- social protection measures;
- strengthened multilateral cooperation;
- greater government transparency;
- the need for continued access to markets for economic recovery;
- South-South cooperation;
- collaboration on the development and provision of a vaccine against COVID-19;
- increasing funding to transform supply chain models;
- issuing IMF Special Drawing Rights to expand liquidity; and
- inviting the UNGA to set out a process to ensure the 21 SDG targets that have a 2020 deadline are reviewed and updated if necessary.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3358e.html>

Building Back Better After COVID-19 and Acting Where We Will Have the Greatest Impact on the SDGs

Six sessions on this topic were held during the first week, on:

- protecting and advancing human well-being and ending poverty (most closely related to SDG 1 on no poverty; SDG 3 on good health and well-being; SDG 4 on quality education; SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and SDG 17 on global partnerships);
- ending hunger and achieving food security (most closely related to SDG 2 on zero hunger; SDG 3; and SDG 17);
- responding to the economic shock, relaunching growth, sharing economic benefits and addressing developing countries' financing challenges (most closely related to SDG 5 on gender equality; SDG 7 on affordable and clean energy; SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth; SDG 10 on reduced inequalities; and SDG 17);
- protecting the planet and building resilience (most closely related to SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production; SDG 13 on climate action; SDG 14 on life below water; SDG 15 on life on land; and SDG 17);
- sustaining efforts to ensure access to sustainable energy (most closely related to SDGs 7, 12, 13, and 17); and
- bolstering local action to control the pandemic and accelerate implementation (most closely related to SDG 9 on industry,

innovation, and infrastructure; SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities; and SDG 17).

Protecting and advancing human well-being and ending poverty: In this session, on Tuesday, 7 July, keynote speaker David Nabarro, WHO Special Envoy on COVID-19, delivered four main messages:

- COVID-19 is here to stay, and we will need 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 Special Advisor on Africa, highlighted the need for responses to incorporate human rights, close opportunity gaps, and build institutions back 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 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 on 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.

In the discussion, participants discussed the need to, *inter alia*:

- learn from the pandemic, to inform the fight against climate change;
- ensure COVID-19 responses move the agenda forward on poverty eradication, healthcare, education, and public infrastructure;
- make food and nutrition a fundamental priority;
- make effective investments that support a green and digital future; and
- ensure the protection of human rights, transparency, and access to information and data.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3358e.html>

Ending hunger and achieving food security: In this session, on Tuesday, 7 July, 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, 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 Basterra, 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 (IFAD), highlighted the need for small-scale producers to have access to markets, financial services, and knowledge and training.

In the discussion, participants discussed the need for, *inter alia*:

- a redistributive effort to address the aftermath of the pandemic;
- multi-sectoral nutrition and health policies, and nexus approaches to fight hunger;
- a comprehensive and coordinated global effort;
- investments in sustainable agricultural resources;
- protection of agricultural supply chains;
- public policies in support of sustainable food systems;
- placing food security and nutrition at the center of the emergency response, and the role of the UN Secretary-General's 2021 Food Systems Summit in achieving this;
- prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable, including smallholder farmers, and women and girls;
- food system transformations based on the three dimensions of sustainability, gender equality, and equitable distribution of resources; and
- 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.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3358e.html>

Responding to the economic shock, relaunching growth, sharing economic benefits, and addressing developing countries' financing challenges: This session, on Wednesday, 8 July, was moderated by Mahmoud Mohieldin, Special Envoy on Financing the 2030 Agenda.

Resource person Carolina Sánchez-Páramo, World Bank, called for income support, ensuring functioning of food systems and markets, and locally-adapted policy responses.

Resource person Arunabha Ghosh, Council on Energy, Environment and Water, proposed a “global risk pooling reserve fund” to cushion countries against chronic risks, including climate change.

Lead discussant Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), highlighted the need for: global financial

safety nets, including debt for SDGs swaps, investments in job stimulation, strengthening fiscal resources, and leveraging private finance.

Lead discussant Mamadou Diallo, Major Group for Workers and Trade Unions, called for labor protection floors, universal social protection, and social contracts based on protection for all workers.

Ministerial respondent Saad Alfarargi, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, urged meaningful participation of all stakeholders in holistic development agendas, budgets, and processes.

In the discussion that followed, participants described national efforts to address the economic impacts of COVID-19; highlighted the importance of global solidarity; noted the challenges faced by MICs; and underscored the role of development banks.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at: <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3359e.html>

Protecting the planet and building resilience: This session, on Wednesday, 8 July, was chaired by Munir Akram, Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the UN and ECOSOC Vice-President, and moderated by Shaun Tarbuck, International Cooperative and Mutual Insurance Federation.

Resource person Adjany Costa, Minister for Culture, Tourism, and Environment, Angola, noted that local traditions, needs, and aspirations should be central to efforts to protect the planet.

Resource person Sandra Diaz, Co-Chair, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), said the IPBES assessment found that scenarios compatible with the 2030 Agenda require transformational change. She highlighted three IPBES recommendations for pandemic recovery efforts: do no further harm to the health of people and nature; employ subsidies, incentives, investments, and regulations as carrots and sticks; and mainstream the health of people and nature into all sectors.

Lead discussant Takeuchi Kazuhiko, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, said Japan is focused on decentralized and integrated management of resources at appropriate geographical scales with a vision to decarbonize the economy and co-exist harmoniously with nature.

Highlighting the role farmers play in ensuring sustainable food systems, lead discussant Theo De Jager, Farmers Major Group, called on banking and financial institutions to be key partners in developing services that support rural communities.

Ministerial respondent Joaquín Roa Burgos, Minister of the National Emergency Secretariat, Paraguay, called for the current “global paralysis” to be transformed into accelerated efforts towards environmental protection and climate change mitigation.

Ministerial respondent María Claudia García, Vice-Minister of Environmental Policies and Normalization, Colombia, outlined her country's “biodiverciudad” concept, which incorporates nature into urban planning.

Ministerial respondent Eva Svedling, State Secretary at the Ministry of Environment, Sweden, urged a continued prioritization of climate change during the pandemic recovery period and called on countries to enhance their nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement.

Underscoring the role of mangroves in protecting coastal communities, ministerial respondent Enamur Rahman, State Minister, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, Bangladesh, highlighted his government's efforts in successfully evacuating 2.4 million people during a cyclone while observing social distancing measures.

Ministerial respondent Kitty Sweeb, Permanent Representative of Suriname to the UN, called for the inclusion of forest-based solutions into the immediate and long-term pandemic response and recovery plans.

Respondent Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity, said this is a “pivotal moment” in world history, and noted that the post-2020 global biodiversity framework is at a zero draft stage, building on the best available science and an ongoing consultation process.

The ensuing discussion focused on addressing habitat destruction, wildlife trade, and international cooperation.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at: <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3359e.html>

Sustaining efforts to ensure access to sustainable energy:

This session, on Wednesday, 8 July, was chaired by ECOSOC Vice-President Margaryan and moderated by Damilola Ogunbiyi, UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Sustainable Energy for All.

Resource person Francesco La Camera, Director-General, International Renewable Energy Agency, called for doubling annual energy transition investment to USD 2 trillion over the next three years, to provide an effective stimulus.

Resource person Hans Olav Ibrekk, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway, said current ambition on renewable energy and energy efficiency is inadequate to keep average global temperature rise below 1.5°C, and called for stronger political commitment to maintain the momentum on SDG 7.

Resource person Sheila Oparaocha, ENERGIA, called for integrating sustainable energy solutions into COVID-19 recovery strategies, prioritizing modern energy, creating jobs in sustainable energy, and phasing out inefficient energy subsidies.

Lead discussant Leena Srivastava, Scientific and Technological Community Major Group, underscored a focus on quality, reliability, efficiency, and pricing of energy when measuring energy access.

Ministerial respondent Omar Ayub Khan, Minister of Energy, Pakistan, proposed an international mechanism to create bankable projects for project financing to reduce urban-rural disparities in energy access.

Ministerial respondent Cristina Gallach, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Spain, emphasized the opportunity to address climate change offered by the pandemic and noted her government’s support for the European Green Deal.

Respondent Li Yong, Director General, UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) shared best practices for SDG 7, including the formulation of integrated resource and resilience plans, and clean technology innovation programmes to support entrepreneurs.

Respondent Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, called for “risk informing” energy investments.

Ministerial respondent Fatima Al Foora, Assistant Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, United Arab Emirates, noted her government’s support to energy access in other countries and invited others to join that effort.

In the ensuing discussion, interventions focused on the role of the private sector, the need to end fossil fuel subsidies, the need for capacity-building, and measures to mobilize finance.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at: <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3359e.html>

Bolstering local action to control the pandemic and accelerate implementation: This session, on Thursday, 9 July, was chaired by Juan Sandoval, Permanent Representative of

Mexico to the UN and ECOSOC Vice-President, and moderated by Gino Van Begin, Local Governments for Sustainability.

Resource person Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director, UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), said building greater resilience to future pandemics will also improve the resilience of communities in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Resource person Yūji Kuroiwa, Governor, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, called attention to the potential of the digital transformation in controlling COVID-19 outbreaks in cities, for instance, by using smartphone apps to track the physical and mental health of citizens.

Lead discussant Olga Algayerová, Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), stressed that restrictions on freedoms of assembly and movement imposed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 should not compromise public consultation and participation in development projects.

Lead discussant Santiago del Hierro, architect, Ecuador, highlighted the need to invest in inexpensive, bottom-up, scalable, low-tech innovations to address basic human needs.

Lead discussant Mabel Bianco, Women’s Major Group, highlighted the potential role of STI in making cities and urban areas more inclusive, while calling for a systemic approach to SDG implementation.

Respondent Penny Abeywardena, Commissioner for International Affairs, New York City, highlighted her city’s role in pioneering voluntary local reviews (VLRs) in 2018 and promoting the approach elsewhere, including through a VLR Declaration signed by 208 local and regional governments so far.

In the ensuing discussion, participants focused on the need to tackle organized crime, the role of data disaggregation and monitoring, the participation of civil society and marginalized communities, and sustainable infrastructure investment.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at: <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3360e.html>

Transformative Pathways to Realize the 2030 Agenda: A Whole of Society Approach Taking into Account the Impact of COVID-19 (Stakeholder Perspective)

This session, on Tuesday, 7 July, was chaired by ECOSOC President Juul. She 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 Goroso Giwa, Huairou Commission, called for implementing policies to address the inclusion of grassroots women in COVID-19 recovery policies, and care and support for 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, highlighted the need for policy coherence.

In the discussion, participants highlighted the importance of, *inter alia*:

- progress on sustainable development without compromising human rights;
- freedom of expression;
- civic spaces, to shine a spotlight on inequality;
- addressing mistrust between civil society and governments;
- rethinking exploitative labor practices; and
- ensuring that the pandemic is not used 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.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3358e.html>

Mobilizing International Solidarity, Accelerating Action and Embarking on New Pathways to Realize the 2030 Agenda and the SAMOA Pathway: Small Island Developing States

This session, on Wednesday, 8 July, was chaired by ECOSOC Vice-President Akram, and moderated by Fekitameloala 'Utoikamanu, High Representative for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), and Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Describing the devastating impact of COVID-19 on Fiji's economy, keynote speaker Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications, Fiji, called for: preferential access in global trade for SIDS; COVID-19 vaccines to be treated as a global public good; and reforms to the "out of date" international financial system.

Resource person Abdulla Shahid, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, called on international financial institutions to re-examine eligibility criteria for SIDS' access to loans and grants.

Highlighting the limited fiscal space of SIDS, resource person Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), called for a debt relief initiative irrespective of income levels, access to concessional funding, and the use of contingency bonds.

Resource person Terri Toyota, World Economic Forum, highlighted the need to leverage business and financial networks to mobilize investments and design creative financial vehicles.

Calling for solidarity to be placed at the forefront, lead discussant Karol Alejandra Arámbula Carrillo, NGO Major Group, emphasized the need for COVID-19 testing and vaccine development.

Ministerial respondent Marsha Caddle, Minister for Economic Affairs and Investment, Barbados, said provisions for natural disasters need to be incorporated into debt instruments, and urged a focus on vulnerability rather than GDP per capita.

In the ensuing discussion, participants highlighted, *inter alia*: the unsustainable debt situation SIDS face; SIDS' need for concessional finance; the structural deficiencies of the global economic system; the impact of COVID-19 on tourism and gender-based violence; and international cooperation.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at: <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3359e.html>

Are we leaving no one behind in eradicating poverty and working towards the 2030 Agenda?

This session, on Thursday, 9 July, was chaired by ECOSOC Vice-President Margaryan and moderated by Diane Elson, University of Essex.

Resource person Ifeyinwa Ofong, WorldWIDE Network Nigeria, lamented the commodification of housing and land, with negative impacts on the right to housing and access to land.

Resource person Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director, UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), highlighted extreme global wealth inequality while calling for a "people's vaccine" against COVID-19, with priority access for health workers and vulnerable groups.

Lead discussant Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), called for redistribution policies and universal social protection systems.

Lead discussant Anriette Esterhuysen, Internet Governance Forum, urged tackling the digital divide, which she said is resulting in inequalities in access to education.

Lead discussant Sophia Bachmann, German UN Youth Delegate on Sustainable Development, called for a policy shift from job creation to decent job creation.

Lead discussant John Patrick Ngoyi, Together 2030, urged enhancing the capacity of vulnerable groups to engage in direct dialogue with governments.

Respondent Natalia Kanem, Executive Director, UN Population Fund (UNFPA), said quality population data is necessary for service provision and empowering people to enjoy their rights.

Respondent Paul Ladd, UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), called for a post-pandemic review of fiscal policy, and said only a few countries have prioritized the needs of vulnerable groups in recovery packages.

In the discussion, participants focused on: the inclusion of persons with disabilities, addressing inequalities, the inclusion of internally displaced people, participation of youth, access to health services, international tax governance reform, and the role of civil society in emergency response.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at: <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3360e.html>

Mobilizing International Solidarity, Accelerating Action and Embarking on New Pathways to Realize the 2030 Agenda and Respond to COVID-19: African countries, LDCs, and LLDCs

This session on Thursday, 9 July, was chaired by ECOSOC President Juul and moderated by Fahmida Khatun, Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Keynote speaker Agnes Kalibata, Special Envoy for the 2021 Food System Summit, called for investment in food systems, integration of climate change into recovery plans, and debt relief for countries with unsustainable debt.

Resource person Ibrahim Assane Mayaki, former Prime Minister of Niger, called for well-being, job creation, resilience, inclusiveness, and equity as measures of success, instead of GDP.

Resource person Khalifa bin Jassim Al-Kuwari, Qatar Fund for Development, highlighted a global network of 60 Accelerator Labs to test local solutions for global challenges; and called for

“standby” action plans and financing mechanisms to reduce the humanitarian impacts and costs of global crises, and safeguard development gains.

Resource person Ahmed Ouma, African Center for Disease Control and Prevention, reported on solidarity measures in Africa to share political and strategic guidance, secure borders, and mobilize resources to support preparedness and response.

Lead discussant Vanessa Chivizhe, Junior Parliament of Zimbabwe, called for inclusion of youth in every step of decision-making, and for implementation of existing policies.

Lead discussant Trymore Karikoga, Volunteers Stakeholder Group, urged states to integrate volunteering in all stages of the 2030 Agenda process.

Respondent ‘Matsepo Molise-Ramakoae, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Relations, Lesotho, called for assistance to LLDCs in light of the devastating socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, including increased official development assistance (ODA) from development partners.

Respondent Fekitamuelo ‘Utoikamanu, High Representative for the LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS, noted the need to improve transport connectivity, trade facilitation, and access to information and communications technologies and digital connectivity.

Respondent Thomas Munthali, National Planning Commission, Malawi, stressed the need to build the capacity of LLDCs to diversify and realize their export potential.

In the discussion, participants highlighted, *inter alia*:

- international solidarity and partnerships to help vulnerable countries benefit from international trade, ensure a future COVID-19 vaccine is accessible and affordable, and support graduation from LDC status;
- international support, including technology and capacity building, and debt alleviation and cancellation;
- emergency health packages, including personal protective equipment, capacity building for medical and frontline workers, and suspension of patent laws to allow LDCs access to medical supplies;
- focus on energy and digital technology access, social protection, migrant workers’ rights, and employment protection;
- improved business environments and private sector partnerships around food security; and
- existing efforts, including the African Union’s COVID-19 Response Fund and coordination among African multilateral institutions, the private sector, and regional disease control centers.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3360e.html>

Means of Implementation to Match the Scope of the Crisis and the Breadth of our Ambition for 2030

This session, on Friday, 10 July, was held in two parts: mobilizing well directed financing; and science, technology, and innovation (STI).

Mobilizing well directed financing: This session was moderated by Annalisa Prizzon, Overseas Development Institute, who encouraged countries to commit a sizable share of their fiscal stimulus packages to development cooperation, and invest in multilateral development banks, which she said can mobilize resources quickly and at scale.

Resource person Ryan Straughn, Minister of Finance, Barbados, called for determining access to financing based on measures of vulnerability, noting that vulnerability is not linked to a country’s economic prospects or income level.

Resource person Jorge Moreira da Silva, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), underscored the importance of maintaining existing ODA commitments in the context of falling external flows and tax revenues in low-income countries and MICs.

Highlighting that only 3% of the world’s venture capital goes to women, resource person Sharinee Shannon Kalayanamitr, Gobi Partners, called for partnerships and ecosystems to connect stakeholders in support of companies founded by women.

Lead discussant Ambroise Fayolle, European Investment Bank, said the Bank has designed a EUR 5 billion package to support COVID-19 response and recovery in the poorest countries.

Lead discussant Lidy Nacpil, Asian Peoples’ Movement on Debt and Development, urged the UN to lead calls for wider and deeper debt cancellation, relief, and restructuring; additional finance without debt or conditionalities; and reviews of illegitimate debt practices, as well as lending and borrowing policies.

Respondent Marie-Gabrielle Ineichen-Fleisch, State Secretary for Economic Affairs, Switzerland, supported structural reform to free up public and private resources to address global challenges like climate change, and global efforts to reduce the cost of remittances.

In the discussion, participants drew attention to the need for, *inter alia*:

- urgent and easy access to emergency finance;
- green bonds, guarantees, and blended finance;
- alignment of public and private finance with the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, and transforming of supply chains;
- just and fair investments in green technologies and digital education;
- addressing of structural gender inequalities, including in COVID-19 stimulus packages; and
- funding to implement the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy.

In closing remarks, Kalayanamitr said joint task groups are needed to map out and connect the SDGs with implementers on the ground. Moreira da Silva said the OECD is committed to continuing its focus on data to improve the evidence base of policies. Straughn said international frameworks need to be open, transparent, and equitable.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3361e.html>

Science, technology, and innovation: This session was moderated by George Essegbe, Science and Technology Policy Research Institute, who highlighted the need to strengthen connections between science and policy.

Resource person Vaughan Turekian, Co-Chair of the 10 Member Group to Support the Technology Facilitation Mechanism, said the pandemic has revealed how technology is changing the relationship between science and society, and stressed the need for all researchers to have access to necessary technologies.

Resource person Helen Rees, Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute, welcomed the speed of STI-related global cooperation in response to the pandemic, but worried that African scientists and voices had been left out.

Lead discussant Teresa Stoepler, InterAcademy Partnership for Research, highlighted the lack of international cooperation and of scientific capacity in some countries to respond to the pandemic, and the threats to scientific cooperation from the rise in nationalism.

Lead discussant Elenita Dano, Erosion, Technology and Concentration Group, decried “a digital dreamworld that enriches

few” while a large proportion of humanity does not have access to the Internet or even to electricity.

Respondent Viktor Nedović, Assistant Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development, Serbia, emphasized the importance of mobilizing the potential of STI in times of crisis.

Respondent Kekgonne Baipoledi, Ministry of Tertiary Education, Research, Science, and Technology, Botswana, called for a redirection of STI policies to ensure that emerging technologies enable marginalized people to transform their lives for the better.

Respondent Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education, and Youth, said the pandemic highlights the need for new forms of collaboration and purpose-driven innovation.

In the discussion, participants underscored the importance of, *inter alia*:

- “STI for SDGs” roadmaps, STI partnerships, and STI benefits for developing countries;
- open science and innovation, sharing of, and access to, scientific results and technology solutions;
- further investment in research and development, and broadband connectivity, and addressing the digital gap for vulnerable groups; and
- scaling up innovations in agriculture to produce more food in a sustainable way.

A more detailed summary of the discussion is available at <https://enb.iisd.org/vol33/enb3361e.html>

High-level Segment of ECOSOC / Ministerial Segment of HLPF

ECOSOC President Juul opened this session, on Tuesday, 14 July, 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.

While the general debate of the High-level Segment was cancelled, states and other participants provided

written statements, which can be viewed at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020#debate>

Keynote by the UNEA President and a Regional Message: ECOSOC President Juul chaired this session, on Tuesday, 14 July. In his keynote address, Sveinung Rotevatn, President of the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA 5) 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 has 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.

Messages from the Regions; Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative of Morocco to the UN and ECOSOC Vice-President, chaired this session, which took place on Wednesday, 15 July. Moderator Vera Songwe 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 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 multi-stakeholder 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 ECE, 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: multi-stakeholder 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, participants discussed the need for: further analysis of the impacts and challenges caused by COVID-19 in the regions; allocating adequate resources for the health sector; accelerating decarbonization and access to clean energy; and a COVID-19 Observatory in the Latin America and the Caribbean region, for information and analysis on the health, economic, and social impacts of the pandemic.

Voluntary National Reviews

VNR presentations by 47 countries began on Friday, 10 July, and continued until the end of the Ministerial Segment on Thursday, 16 July.

Opening the session on VNRs on 10 July, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed identified key emerging themes in this year's VNRs, including: an emphasis on budget and financing frameworks; a continued commitment to leave no one behind; and the growing engagement of local governments in implementation. She said the UN Secretary-General's updated VNR guidelines, due later in 2020, will reflect the need for a "forward-looking" spirit in the VNRs.

ECOSOC Vice-President Sandoval, in his capacity as Chair of the Group of Friends of the VNRs and Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda, noted that peer learning is at the heart of the VNRs.

Presenting **Armenia's** second VNR, Mher Grigoryan, Deputy Prime Minister, highlighted: preparations to formulate Armenia Transformation 2050, a strategy with 16 goals and targets; progress in reforming the judicial system; and the high-tech industry as a driver for growth. He noted challenges with ending poverty by 2023 and reducing the unemployment rate; and mentioned the launch of 20 COVID-19 assistance packages amounting to 2% of GDP.

In response to questions, Grigoryan underscored: the adoption of advanced agricultural technologies; plans to increase the share of solar power in electricity production to 15% by 2030; an increase in the share of female members of Parliament since the 2019 election; and protection of human rights as a key priority.

Presenting **Samoa's** second VNR, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Natural Resources and the Environment, highlighted progress in: literacy and numeracy; engaging stakeholders; integrating the SDGs and the SAMOA Pathway into national development planning; women's representation in Parliament; and strengthening disaster risk response.

In response to questions, Mata'afa reported that: data availability and quality has improved, and a data validation process is in place; and although Samoa remains COVID-19-free, the tourism sector and remittances have been impacted. She took note of a statement by the Indigenous Peoples Major Group that 10% of persons with disabilities in Samoa have never been to school.

Presenting **Ecuador's** second VNR, Sandra Katherine Argotty, Technical Secretariat of Planning, highlighted improvements in indicators on gender income equality, maternal mortality, sanitation services, workforce integration of people with

disabilities, housing, poverty eradication, and Internet usage. Identifying COVID-19-related challenges, she listed: economic contraction; reduction in foreign exchange income; challenges in access to remote learning; and rising violence against women.

In response to questions, Argotty highlighted: prioritization of the needs of the poorest; formulation of medium- and long-term plans to adapt to falling oil prices; and the need for greater flexibility from international financial institutions on payment obligations.

Honduras's second VNR highlighted: continued challenges to providing decent work despite significant economic growth; efforts to tackle extreme poverty through programmes such as the Better Life subsidy that provides conditional cash transfers to improve access to health, education, and housing; and a reallocation of public expenditure due to the pandemic.

In response to questions, she said the country's National Commission for the SDGs adopts an inclusive approach to planning, and municipalities have been provided with guides to link local planning with the 2030 Agenda.

Presenting **Slovenia's** second VNR, Zvone Černač, Minister for Development, Strategic Projects and Cohesion, highlighted: efforts to ensure accessible and high quality public services for all; subsidized school meals and free public transport for school children and pensioners; access to drinking water for all; and a policy to provide one year of maternal leave.

The presentation of Slovenia's VNR was interrupted due to technical difficulties with the audio, and no questions were taken up.

Presenting the second VNR for **Nepal**, Puspa Raj Kadel, National Planning Commission, reported progress in poverty reduction, education, health, and water, and providing electricity access; but noted an annual investment of USD 19 billion is still required to achieve the SDGs. He said COVID-19 is adversely affecting economic growth, resulting in a surge of returning migrant workers and a corresponding decline in remittances, and increasing the likelihood of people falling back below the poverty line.

In response to questions, Kadel highlighted: guidelines for sub-national governments; capacity-building programmes at the sub-national level; plans to expand the country's social protection system coverage to 75% by 2030; and mechanisms to include marginalized people.

Presenting the second VNR for **Georgia**, Lasha Darsalia, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, reported progress in: human capital development and social welfare; economic growth; and democratic governance. Among issues requiring closer attention, he listed: leaving no one behind; investing in young people; decentralized development; and greener energy production and consumption. He said Georgia will aim to: generate better quality data; address pollution and contamination; localize SDGs at the municipal level; and link SDG targets to budgeting.

In response to questions, Darsalia highlighted the integration of the SDGs and 2030 Agenda into the national policy process, and the establishment of working groups to plan and monitor the SDGs.

Presenting the second VNR for **Nigeria**, Adejoke Orelope-Adefulire, Senior Special Assistant to the President on the SDGs, said priority SDGs have been integrated into the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan for 2017-2020. She noted efforts to build a more inclusive economy and identified the need to invest more in education. Among challenges, she listed: high unemployment rates; maternal mortality; out-of-school children; and regional inequalities.

In response to questions, Orelope-Adefulire said: Nigeria's evidence-based review is underpinned by credible data from statistical authorities; and efforts are underway with sub-national governments to get children back to school.

Presenting the second VNR for **Kenya**, Ukur Yatani Kanacho, Cabinet Secretary for National Treasury and Planning, highlighted the country's "Big 4 Agenda" prioritizing food and nutrition security, healthcare, manufacturing, and affordable housing. He noted advancements in renewable energy installed per capita, infrastructure, and domestic resource mobilization.

In response to questions, Kanacho said the national SDG awareness-raising strategy engages civil society organizations, focus groups, and social media; and the National Bureau of Statistics has signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Commission for Human Rights to ensure a human rights-based approach to data collection.

Presenting the second VNR for **Uganda**, Mary Karoro Okurut, Cabinet Minister in Charge of General Duties, highlighted improved access to electricity, reduced unemployment, and increased manufacturing capabilities. She attributed the progress to social protection programmes, rural electrification projects, and a sound economic growth rate. Immaculate Akello, representative of Uganda's Youth Coalition for the SDGs, highlighted achievements in "go back to school" interventions, and efforts to raise SDG awareness in remote areas.

In response to questions, Okurut described initiatives to improve livelihood prospects for youth, including a Youth Venture Capital Fund, small grants, and a youth skill-building programme. She said the government has successfully controlled the spread of COVID-19 and its impact on the economy.

Presenting the second VNR for **Bangladesh**, Muhammad Abdul Mannan, Planning Minister, listed initiatives undertaken since the first VNR, including: an SDGs Action Plan; a national data coordination committee; approval of 40 priority indicators for localizing SDGs; a framework of collaboration with government and various UN organizations; and inclusion of the SDGs into school curricula. He said poverty reduction efforts were on track until the pandemic hit, and highlighted, as immediate responses, a national cash transfer programme and support to 19 economic sectors, including health.

In response to questions, Zuen Aziz, Prime Minister's Office, and Shamsul Alam, Planning Commission, highlighted: locally-developed and scaled-up solutions, including 14,000 community clinics to reduce child mortality; and government efforts to develop primary and secondary education.

Presenting the second VNR for **India**, Rajiv Kumar, NITI Aayog, reported progress, including: lifting 271 million people from multi-dimensional poverty; the provision of health insurance for 500 million people; and increased access to housing, sanitation, clean fuels, and banking. He said India's COVID-19 stimulus package of USD 276 billion amounts to 10% of the country's GDP, and highlighted international initiatives led by India, including the International Solar Alliance, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, and the India-UN Development Partnership Fund.

In response to questions, Kumar noted India's progress in ensuring renewable energy access to the poor, including through off-grid solar photovoltaic programmes, and in financial inclusion of women, including a reduction of the gender gap in bank account ownership. He shared ongoing work to strengthen cooperative federalism to ensure SDG achievement by all states, and explained how the government is institutionalizing

partnerships with civil society organizations into VNR and SDG planning processes.

Presenting the second VNR for **Morocco**, Nezha El Ouafi, Minister Delegate to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccan Expatriates, noted achievements in improving living standards, housing, health, education, renewable energy, and ending rural isolation. She said factors contributing to this forward momentum included: strengthening the institutional framework for implementation; adopting a diversified strategy to mobilize financial resources; undertaking a series of national, regional, and thematic consultations; and fostering effective cooperation with the UN Development Programme.

In response to questions, El Ouafi highlighted: factors leading to Morocco's successful COVID-19 response; the role of civil society in the VNR process; initiatives undertaken on climate change and food security; and South-South cooperation with African countries on adaptation to climate change in the agriculture sector.

Presenting the second VNR for **Niger**, Ahmat Jidoud, Minister of Budget, noted progress in reducing infant mortality, combating desertification, and addressing climate change. He said key lessons learned were on the importance of: ensuring inclusive development; communicating and disseminating information; ensuring sustainable use of resources; and maintaining strong economic growth. He noted challenges, including in empowering women and girls, strengthening human capital, mobilizing resources, and harmonizing data collection.

In response to questions, Jidoud described: measures undertaken to ensure meaningful participation of all stakeholders in the VNR process; strategies adopted to promote awareness of the SDGs among all relevant stakeholders; and specific initiatives taken to reduce inequality and discrimination against marginalized groups.

The second VNR for **Panama** highlighted a national focus on: creating inclusion; fighting poverty and inequality; investing in education and health; and addressing social equality among vulnerable communities. While recognizing the urgency of international cooperation, national intersectoral public health actions in response to the pandemic were highlighted.

In response to questions, María Inés Castillo López, Minister of Social Development, described: efforts to build a multi-dimensional poverty index for children and adolescents, which will be updated every two years as a measure of progress on children's rights; and the Colmena Plan to reduce social inequality where it is most severe, using local governance mechanisms and multisectoral approaches, and involving multiple stakeholders.

Presenting the third VNR for **Benin**, Abdoulaye Bio Tchane, Minister of Planning and Development, noted: the localization of SDG targets, achieved by asking local governments to prioritize 10 out of 49 national priority targets; the identification of nine SDGs as entry points in a national push to "leave no one behind" by eradicating poverty and improving human capital; the identification of bottlenecks in SDG implementation; the development of a 10-year framework of actions for accelerating SDG implementation, in response to the 2019 HLPF Ministerial Declaration; and investments in data and statistics.

In response to questions, Benin said sectoral roundtables are being organized to broaden the number of partners available for financing, and a dedicated ministry on digitalization has been established to spur the digital economy.

Presenting the second VNR for **Costa Rica**, Rodolfo Solano-Quirós and Adriana Bolaños-Argueta, Minister and Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, respectively, noted efforts to translate the

2030 Agenda into a national vision that all stakeholders contribute to, and share accountability for. Bolaños-Argueta highlighted achievements, including: alignment of local planning with the 2030 Agenda by 44% of local governments; growing statistical capacity to track 136 indicators; and development of an SDG-related accountability system for businesses.

In response to questions, Bolaños-Argueta highlighted: her government's comprehensive decarbonization plan, with an ecosystem focus; efforts to tackle inequality through robust employment options; and a multi-dimensional planning approach that reflects Costa Rica's achievements in social policy.

Presenting the second VNR for **Peru**, Javier Abugattás, National Centre for Strategic Planning, reported deeper integration of SDGs in long-term development plans, and said key priorities include the protection of life and risk management, including through improved decision-making processes, coordination, and research. He also highlighted government measures to support indigenous peoples in the Peruvian Amazon in the fight against COVID-19.

In response to questions, Peru highlighted its convening space for civil society, government representatives, and political parties; progress since its 2017 VNR in turning its roadmap into a national vision and a development plan; and budgetary challenges due to COVID-19, while acknowledging the weaknesses in social services and stressing the utmost priority to be given to life, families, and local communities in the recovery process.

Presenting the second VNR for **Argentina**, Victoria Tolosa Paz, National Council for the Coordination of Social Policies, said the current government prioritizes the fight against hunger and multi-dimensional poverty, which goes beyond income and includes access to drinking water and public health. She highlighted: measures to "flatten the curve" of COVID-19 and strengthen the public health system; resource transfers to the most vulnerable groups; and support to companies to preserve jobs.

In response to questions, Argentina drew attention to: measures to promote education via television and the Internet; the priority given by the government to gender equality; and efforts to ensure no one is left behind.

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; VLRs 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.

In response to questions, 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, Borisov highlighted: measures to protect vulnerable groups from the impact of COVID-19, including financial support for micro-enterprises and businesses of persons with disabilities; mobile care units for older people; economic support for 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 of Russia to the UN, 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.

In response to questions, 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 **Burundi's** first VNR, 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.

In response to questions, Sinankwa described: 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 unsustainability; a fiscal deficit heightened by COVID-19; coastal erosion; low levels of investment in STI; and low data availability. He noted progress including the creation of a ministry for women, children and social welfare, and drafting of anti-corruption legislation.

In response to questions, 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 five priority Goals for 2018-2020: SDG 1, SDG 4, SDG 8, SDG 13, and SDG 16. 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, 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.

Presenting the second VNR for **Estonia**, Sven Jürgenson, Permanent Representative of Estonia to the UN, 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, 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 of 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.

In response to questions, 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, Uzbekistan 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, 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.

In response to questions, Loustau-Lalanne noted: great interest in the blue bonds; the designation of 30% of the country's exclusive economic zone as marine protected areas; the establishment of a human rights commission; and the integration of the SDGs into the rolling five-year national strategy.

Syria's first VNR 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.

In response to questions, 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, 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: reduction of 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, 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 developed countries as climate finance, under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, is still not available. He described the mechanisms created to deliver international finance as "not fit for purpose."

Presenting the first VNR for **Trinidad and Tobago**, Pernelle Beckles, Permanent Representative of Trinidad and Tobago 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.

In response to questions, Beckles noted the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, including declining oil prices and reduced tourism, and highlighted the establishment of a recovery roadmap committee.

Presenting the first VNR for **Mozambique**, António Gumende, Permanent Representative of Mozambique 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, Mozambique noted: a multi-stakeholder 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, Sam Basil, Minister for National Planning and Monitoring, said his country will continue to prioritize transport connectivity, the rollout of electrification, support to small and medium enterprises, and agriculture. He described economic stimulus measures adopted as part of the COVID-19 response.

Presenting the first VNR for the **Comoros**, the Secretary of State in charge of Cooperation described: a 2030 national plan formulated on the basis of the 2030 Agenda; a reduction in the share of the population living under the national poverty threshold from 34.3% in 2013 to 23.5% in 2019; stabilization of GDP growth to outpace population growth; enhanced transport links; improved governance; and modernization of the tax system. Among challenges, he listed: a fall in remittances; a slowdown in economic activity that has reduced tax revenue and could wipe out small and medium enterprises; and a drop in foreign direct investment.

In response to questions, Comoros described: a toolkit for institutions for social protection and a social safety net programme; policies for social and gender equality; and efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 and build resilience despite resource limitations.

Presenting the first VNR for the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, Élysée Munembwe, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Planning, underscored progress including: improved access to safe drinking water; acceleration in the provision of free basic education; improvements in reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health; the beginnings of universal health coverage; expanded protected areas; and new legal frameworks to strengthen women's rights and environmental protection. She said the government is exploring possibilities for mobilizing innovative sources of finance.

In response to questions, Munembwe highlighted plans for a survey on SDG implementation with regard to persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples.

Presenting the first VNR for **Kyrgyzstan**, Sanjar Mukanbetov, Minister of Economy, highlighted achievements in: expanding access to education to 99% of the population; reducing child mortality; and tackling statelessness. He noted the economic growth rate was insufficient for rapid improvement in livelihoods.

Tatyana Tretyakova, representing Kyrgyz civil society, said more than 130 NGOs were involved in the VNR preparation.

In response to questions, Kyrgyzstan noted: ongoing judicial reform including the adoption of a new criminal code; a network of protected areas; measures to protect vulnerable groups; and a policy to ensure viability of businesses during the pandemic.

Presenting the first VNR for **Libya**, Taher Jehaimi, Minister of Planning, and Taher Belhassan, Sustainable Development Committee, Ministry of Planning, noted improving trends in: social safety networks; literacy and education enrolment; reproductive health and child mortality; cleaner energy; and urban planning. As challenges, they identified: road accident deaths; pre-primary education enrolment; wastewater treatment and natural water withdrawal rates; economic growth; spread of slums; desertification; and human displacement and conflict-related deaths.

In response to questions, Jehaimi explained that: Libya chose to prioritize 10 SDGs to enable a more effective VNR process, noting the country believes all 17 Goals are important; and various challenges complicate efforts to reach the country's social and economic goals and also affected the drafting of the VNR, including political instability and insecurity, a related decrease in oil exports and related revenue, illegal migration, COVID-19, and lack of statistics and data.

Presenting the first VNR for **Malawi**, delegates reported progress in: school enrolment rates; girls attending secondary school; youth literacy; sanitation; and lower maternal and neonatal mortality. Challenges were noted in gender inequality, poverty, and monitoring and evaluation.

In response to questions, Thomas Munthali, National Planning Commission, Malawi, highlighted: the removal of fees for secondary education; the introduction of sanitary facilities in schools; awareness raising to discourage child marriage; a digital economy strategy; measures for climate-smart agriculture; a green belt initiative; and planned measures to address corruption. Maria Jose Torres Macho, UN Resident Coordinator for Malawi, called for increasing investments in the SDGs, and stressed the importance of gender equality, access to information, and leaving no one behind.

Presenting the first VNR for **Zambia**, Alexander Chiteme, Minister of National Development Planning, and Chola Chabala, Ministry of National Development Planning, highlighted: institutional arrangements for SDG implementation; a reduction of multi-dimensional poverty to 44%; investments in infrastructure and energy production; and improvements in health and gender equality. Precious Mulenga, civil society representative, called for a more inclusive process for civil society organizations to participate in SDG implementation.

In response to questions, Zambia highlighted a move towards a more diversified energy mix, recovery packages to address COVID-19 impacts, and a growing debt burden.

Presenting the first VNR of the **Republic of Moldova**, Adrian Ermurachi, Deputy Secretary General of the Government, noted progress in: combating non-communicable diseases; school enrolment of children with disabilities; and women in managerial positions. He highlighted as policy commitments: health and education services; social protection and insurance systems; addressing risky behavior among young people; energy efficiency and renewable energy; labor market inclusion; vocational training; improved water and soil quality; climate resilience; participatory decision-making; and investments in a national data system.

In response to questions, Moldova explained: the VNR recommendations will feed into a new cycle of development

planning; stakeholders were involved in the VNR's development; a forthcoming census will provide more complete and recent data; both medical and social assistance were provided in response to COVID-19; a strategy on non-communicable diseases will help in addressing them; and the relevance of education for the future employment of graduates remains a preoccupation.

Presenting the first VNR for **Liberia**, Augustus J. Flomo, Deputy Minister for Economic Management, said a national development plan and legislation, including the Land Rights Act and Local Governments Act, was adopted in 2018 to address entrenched inequality and economic deprivation. He said progress in some areas, including reducing extreme poverty, undernourishment, and maternal mortality, decelerated because of the economic slowdown caused first by the 2014 Ebola outbreak and then COVID-19. Priorities are being reconsidered, he noted, to focus on local infrastructure development, improving agriproduct value chains, and investments in health and education.

In response to a question, he highlighted several partnership initiatives to invest in COVID-19 recovery, saying if partners align with the government's agenda, a lot can be achieved.

Presenting the VNR for **Barbados**, Marsha Caddle, Minister of Economic Affairs and Investment, detailed measures taken in response to COVID-19, including: social protection for workers in the informal sector, self-employed, and small businesses; reconnecting water supply to households that could not pay; expanding access to public health; and a farmers' empowerment drive to support nutrition and food security. Noting that Barbados' response was held back by a high level of indebtedness, she said the country is a "canary in the mine of the international system" and called for concessional finance for MICs, and objective measures of vulnerability to determine access to concessional funding.

Presenting the VNR for **Solomon Islands**, Rexon Ramofafia, Minister for National Planning, highlighted: integration of the SDGs into the national development strategy; progress towards achieving universal health coverage; the need to reduce reliance on imported diesel for fuel; and the role of free education in increasing enrolment rates in primary and secondary schools.

In response to questions, Solomon Islands: said the Integrated Financing Framework provides operational steps to translate the national development strategy into action; expressed the need to clarify short-, medium-, and long-term goals for COVID-19 recovery; and highlighted efforts to build on the gains achieved by the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands.

Closing of the HLPF

ECOSOC President Juul chaired the closing session on Thursday, 16 July.

"We were not on track to deliver when COVID-19 hit, and the road ahead is even steeper," UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed said in her closing statement. "We can turn this around if we stay true to the 2030 Agenda." She called for attention to: financing and public services; an inclusive, green, and gender-responsive recovery; listening to youth; and an inclusive and networked multilateral system with the UN at the center.

Juul thanked the co-facilitators of the consultations on the ministerial declaration and said that while an ambitious declaration was emerging, some issues still required discussion. Suggesting countries were close to an agreement, she encouraged all Member States to support its adoption by consensus. She declared the meeting closed at 4:18 pm.

A Brief Analysis of the 2020 HLPF

The vaccine for COVID-19 may not be ready yet, but the antidote for some of its worst impacts already exists. This was the main message from UN Secretary-General António Guterres to Member States participating in the virtual 2020 meeting of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). He regretted that it had not been administered already. "The COVID-19 crisis is having devastating impacts because of our past and present failures," he told his virtual audience. "Because we have yet to take the SDGs seriously."

The Secretary-General's speech put in perspective why the HLPF had to go ahead and meet even in a year when most other multilateral meetings and processes ground to a standstill. Alarm bells had already gone off in 2019, when the HLPF and the SDG Summit found that insufficient progress had been made on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. As a result, a "decade of action and delivery" for sustainable development was launched by the UN, as a springboard for Member States to leap into action. 2020 was meant to be a "super" year, with increased efforts by governments around the world to achieve the SDGs, start implementing the Paris Agreement on climate change, and negotiate new frameworks for post-2020 targets for biodiversity and chemicals and waste management. Instead, within just a few months, the decade of action and delivery became a decade of recovery, as UN General Assembly President Tijjani Muhammad-Bande somberly noted.

This brief analysis considers the role of the HLPF in guiding Member States back on track during the decade of recovery, and the wider impacts of COVID-19 on multilateralism. It also reflects on the impact of this year's virtual format on the HLPF and its mandate.

The Worst Crisis in a Lifetime

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. According to the Secretary-General's progress report on the SDGs this year, what began as a health crisis has quickly become the worst human and economic crisis in a lifetime. More than 3.2 million people had been infected worldwide as of the end of April, and more than 230,000 had died (on the day the HLPF ended, this had risen to 13.5 million cases and 580,000 deaths). Health systems have been overwhelmed around the world. The livelihoods of half the global workforce have been severely impacted by the closing down of businesses and factories, and, according to the report, up to 160 million jobs in tourism, manufacturing, and commodity sectors in developing countries are jeopardized. Tens of millions of people could be forced back into extreme poverty and hunger. Education has been disrupted, with 1.6 billion students out of school. Pre-existing systemic and structural inequalities both within and between countries have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The poorest and the most vulnerable, including women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, and informal sector workers, are disproportionately affected.

Concerns were also raised during the session that restrictions on freedoms of assembly and movement imposed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 could compromise public consultation and participation in development projects or curtail civil society rights.

It was still early for governments participating in the HLPF this year to paint a full picture of the impacts of the pandemic on their people and economies. Some voluntary national reviews (VNRs), for instance, did not mention the pandemic at all,

perhaps because preparations took place before it struck. This made some of the reviews discordant with the reality on the ground. Others included entire sections describing the already severe impacts of the pandemic. Nepal, for instance, described the threat to its economy and to progress on the SDGs, while at the same time expressing concern that with all countries trying to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on their own economies, least developed countries will be left to fend for themselves.

During the first week's discussions, more anecdotal information presented by Member States indicated that the pandemic may shake up long-held ideas and conventions, such as the use of income status as a threshold for access to financial assistance from the global community. Many SIDS who are classified as middle-income countries on the basis of their gross domestic product (GDP) per capita saw their income sources (mainly from tourism, but in some cases also oil production) dry up during the pandemic. Representatives from these countries drew attention to this, calling for a revision of the measures of vulnerability and a recognition of its "multiple shades." The difficulty here, as noted by the moderator, quoting British economist John Maynard Keynes, will be not so much developing new ideas to deal with the pandemic, as escaping old ones.

Build Back Better

The pandemic has not so much generated new lessons, as reiterated what the global community already knew, at a time when we are (perhaps) more inclined to listen. The need to "build back better" was almost universally acknowledged, as was the need for more investments in health care, social protection, and decent jobs. But implementing these solutions at a time of economic hardship could prove more difficult. The ever-present tension between re-igniting economic growth and choosing more sustainable development pathways will be stronger than ever.

Several speakers highlighted the need for emergency assistance to stem the loss of hard-won development gains. Many countries from across the GDP spectrum called for urgent measures such as debt relief, or "debt for SDG swaps," with easy access modalities. The UN Secretary-General has been calling for a rescue package amounting to at least 10% of the global economy, and for adequate levels of debt relief. He was also one of the convenors of a virtual "High-level Event on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond" in May 2020. The event is expected to feed into a finance ministers' meeting and leaders' summit in September 2020, around the opening of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly.

Other speakers worried that the currently onerous processes to access finance would delay recovery efforts. For instance, Minister Camillo Gonsalves from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines described the current mechanisms for accessing climate finance as "not fit for purpose," and "bordering on insulting and callous."

Overall, it is possible that choosing more sustainable pathways may not be as difficult as in the past, but governments may still be tempted to focus on quick and easy wins in the short term. As one speaker pointed out, meeting current, urgent needs without taking into account future resilience would mean governments lose an important opportunity. While rebuilding, they should keep in mind future big crises and the benefits of resilience, not only current costs.

None of Us are Safe Until All of Us are Safe

Will multilateralism survive the pandemic? During the meeting, many countries reiterated that the only way out of this crisis is through global solidarity. But there was also an underlying nervousness and recognition that multilateralism is at a historic low point at this time of greatest need. Some delegates echoed Nepal's concerns that countries may be too busy saving themselves to show solidarity with others. It is true that the pandemic has evoked nationalistic, beggar-thy-neighbor responses from some countries which, for instance, have diverted shipments of limited supplies of personal protection equipment meant for other countries in "an act of modern piracy," bought up almost the entire global supply of remdesivir, the anti-viral drug that can speed the recovery of coronavirus patients; or have been accused of "vaccine nationalism" for trying to secure priority access to a potential COVID-19 vaccine.

What was missing at the HLPF, however, was a clear vision of exactly how multilateralism and the 2030 Agenda can be revived and strengthened. Some elements were mentioned—for instance, promoting solidarity and partnerships; working together to produce a "people's vaccine;" using non-GDP related measures of progress; reform of international financial institutions; broadening of the causes and measures of vulnerability; fair and open global trade; protection of the rules-based international order; and more social security and protection. "For decades, we've struggled to mend multilateral frameworks to meet our realities," said Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Fiji's Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications. "Now is the perfect storm of climate and COVID-19. We're running out of time to remedy an international financial system, which has proved badly out of date." Deeper systemic reform and more transformative change to update the global system to address current challenges will, however, need a more cohesive vision.

The HLPF has the mandate to "provide political leadership, recommendations and guidance," but it has not yet fully done so, as the expert group meeting (EGM) on the lessons learned at the end of the first four years, held in May 2019, noted. Elements of leadership and guidance have been missing even from the annual ministerial declarations, which, one HLPF delegate noted, have instead become "declarations of least resistance" that are negotiated even before the session takes place. This does not allow delegates to actually reflect on the concerns raised at the session—instead, the same set of issues are referenced and the same set of issues are controversial each year for the same reasons. One EGM participant even questioned the value of an annual ministerial declaration, while another felt it did not need to be adopted during the HLPF and could just as well be adopted later. By accident or design, this is what happened at the 2020 meeting. As has become the norm, consensus on the declaration proved impossible. Under normal circumstances, this would have necessitated a vote, but in the absence of online voting procedures, the adoption of the declaration had to be deferred. ECOSOC President Juul circulated a revised draft of the declaration the day after the HLPF ended—if no objections are raised by 22 July, the declaration will be considered as adopted.

"Excellency, Can You Hear Me?"

The HLPF was an important meeting that had to take place, even in an era of social distancing, to remind governments of the importance of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in responding to COVID-19. This necessitated a virtual format, even though digitalization still poses a challenge for many UN Member States,

stakeholders, and even the UN itself. As expected, this had a major impact on the HLPF, which was seen by many as a test case for how future UN meetings can be convened in a virtual environment, including the upcoming commemoration of the UN's 75th anniversary.

First, the agenda of the session had to be changed by the ECOSOC, not only to accommodate the focus on the impacts of COVID-19, but also to make it lighter than earlier planned. The general debate was canceled, and no parallel sessions took place.

The overall number of participants was highest on the opening day, with almost 12,500 viewers of the livestream. This should not be directly compared to the 2,000-2,500 participants who physically participated in New York during the previous three years, as no one knows how many may have watched the webcasts in those years. More people participated during the opening days of the HLPF and the Ministerial Segment. Concerns expressed before the meeting that the virtual format might restrict the engagement of civil society organizations did not bear out by and large as Major Groups and other stakeholders were called on to speak after VNR presentations and were as time-restricted as the government respondents.

Time-keeping was perhaps easier in the virtual format, with the Chairs exercising more control but, as in previous years, the VNRs still seemed very rushed, with little time for interactive discussions and peer learning. Many of the VNRs were completely pre-recorded—including in some cases the discussion, which meant that the questions had been sent in advance and the answers could be better “scripted.” Others had a recorded VNR with a livestreamed discussion, while some chose to livestream both the VNR presentation and the discussion. There were some technical glitches that either delayed VNR presentations or did not allow some listed speakers or respondents to participate.

The thematic discussions did not suffer as many technical glitches, and their content was similar to previous years. The only element of the HLPF that was meant to be “negotiated” by Member States was the ministerial declaration, and while that took place through virtual meetings between diplomats in New York, it still could not be adopted during the closing plenary. This seems to indicate that virtual meetings that are primarily presentation-based work fairly well, although they could disadvantage participants from states with poor Internet access. But the UN still needs to determine if it is even possible to have actual negotiations in a virtual setting, which misses the value of “in the corridors” interactions between diplomats.

Never Waste a Good Crisis

If the task of the UN and its Member States in achieving the SDGs was difficult before, it may seem impossible now. But as the Secretary-General said in his address, we can turn this around. “From the awakening that this crisis is providing, we have a chance to create an inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism.” This call must be heeded, because other warning bells are blaring, and many experts fear that the COVID-19 crisis only foreshadows worse to come. If we failed to take the antidote—the SDGs—before, we must take it now, before the next global crisis strikes.

Upcoming Meetings

75th Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA): UNGA 75 will open on 15 September 2020, and the first day of the high-level General Debate is scheduled for Tuesday, 22 September 2020. The UN will mark its 75th anniversary

with a one-day high-level event on 21 September 2020 on the theme “The Future We Want, the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism.” UNGA 75 will also include: a biodiversity summit; and a high-level meeting to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women. **dates:** 15 September - 30 September 2020 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York (TBD) **www:** <https://www.un.org/en/ga/>

UN 2020 Leaders' Biodiversity Summit: UNGA 75 will convene the UN Summit on Biodiversity under the theme “Urgent action on biodiversity for sustainable development.” Its aim is to provide political direction and momentum to the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. The Summit will consist of an opening segment, a plenary segment for general discussion, two leaders' dialogues, and a brief closing segment. **dates:** 22-23 September 2020 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York (TBD) **www:** <https://www.cbd.int/article/Summit-on-Biodiversity-2020>

Beijing+20: UNGA 75 will convene the UNGA High-level Meeting to Celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing, China, September 1995. **date:** 23 September 2020 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York (TBD) **www:** <https://www.un.org/pga/73/2019/05/22/25th-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women/>

5th Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA): UNEA-5 will take place under the theme “Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.” Its aim will be to connect and consolidate environmental actions within the context of sustainable development and motivate the sharing and implementation of successful approaches. **dates:** 22-26 February 2021 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya **www:** <https://environmentassembly.unenvironment.org/unea5>

HLPF 2021: The 9th session of the HLPF will take place over eight days in July 2021. **date:** TBC **location:** UN Headquarters, New York (TBD) **www:** <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>

For additional meetings, see <http://sdg.iisd.org>

Glossary

2030 Agenda	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
ECE	UN Economic Commission for Europe
ECOSOC	UN Economic and Social Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
GDP	Gross domestic product
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
LDCs	Least developed countries
LLDCs	Landlocked developing countries
MICs	Middle-income countries
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIDS	Small island developing states
STI	Science, technology, and innovation
UNGA	UN General Assembly
VLR	Voluntary local review
VNR	Voluntary national review
WHO	World Health Organization