Third Local and Regional Governments Forum on the 2030 Agenda: The Decade of Action – Bolstering Change from the Ground-up

The Third Local and Regional Governments (LRG) Forum on the 2030 Agenda took place virtually on the sidelines of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The event identified essential elements for kicking off the Decade of Action from the perspective of the LRG constituency in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. It also highlighted actions LRG have taken in preventing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Forum emphasized the importance of multilevel governance, sound local finances, decentralized cooperation, and territorial cohesion in the post-COVID-19 era. Participants shared examples of ways LRG can catalyze the bottom-up transformation towards sustainability and resilience that will be necessary during the recovery.

The Forum took place on 13 July 2020 in a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was organized by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and Local 2030.

Opening Ceremony

Opening the event, Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said the world is facing a crisis, the likes of which have not been seen since the creation of the UN 75 years ago. He said the COVID-19 crisis threatens to reverse gains made in reducing poverty and hunger, as well as in other areas of SDG implementation. In particular, he underscored the need to urgently reverse course on the dual crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. He pointed to the more than 170 SDG Acceleration Actions announced on the DESA platform since its launch at the 2019 SDG Summit. He invited LRG to commit to SDG Acceleration Actions.

Maimunah Mohd Sharif, UN-Habitat Executive Director, stressed LRG alone cannot win the battle against COVID-19. Rather, she said, multilateralism and multi-stakeholder cooperation are also needed. She observed that all the SDGs have targets and indicators related to LRG. She, thus, urged treating LRG not only as mere implementing partners but as active agents of change as well. To tackle the enormous challenges facing cities today, Mohd Sharif underscored the need for: innovative financing mechanisms; investing in human capital to build and sustain capacity; and smart green growth strategies.

Mahmoud Mohieldin, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Financing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, highlighted the need for a new “DNA” for cities – data, networks, and artificial intelligence – to ensure a more rapid recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and effective delivery of essential services.

UCLG President Mohamed Boudra, Mayor of Al Hoceima and President of the Moroccan Association of Mayors, said “the fight against the new coronavirus has become the fight against poverty and inequality.” He underlined the need for LRG to prepare integrated plans for the delivery of essential services. He also called for a new social contract to “build back better.” Boudra called attention to UCLG’s “Towards the Localization of the SDGs” report, which was launched on 10 July 2020. He supported a new multilateralism post-COVID-19 based on
solidarity. He offered LRG support in rethinking multilateralism as the UN celebrates its 75th anniversary.

**Delivering Universal Basic Services**

This session was moderated by Rafael Tuts, Director of Global Solutions Division, UN-Habitat. Magnus Berntsson, President of the Assembly of European Regions, underscored the need for integrating environment-related SDGs in LGR recovery plans and efforts.

Abdessamad Sekkal, President, Rabat-Salé-Kénitra Regional Council, Morocco, emphasized the importance of subsidiarity and citizens’ participation in decision making for SDG implementation in the post-COVID-19 era. He observed that the best-performing countries in managing the new coronavirus are democratic countries, which have effective cooperation among different levels of government.

Rohey Malick Lowe, Mayor of Banjul, The Gambia, said revenue collection and sanitation are the main problems facing her city since the COVID-19 crisis began. She spoke about major challenges related to the fact that in Africa, many people do not think COVID-19 exists and do not respect the health protocols aimed at stopping the spread of the virus.

Mpho Moruakgomo, President, Botswana Association of Local Authorities and Chair, Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), noted COVID-19 has pushed Botswana’s cities and regions to reevaluate their unsustainable consumption and production habits. He mentioned LRG in Botswana have begun promoting sustainable proximity production, whereby things are locally produced and fewer people are left behind.

Osama Al Azzam, Director General, Cities and Villages Development Bank, and Acting Secretary General, Ministry of Local Administration, Jordan, said local governments in his country have begun focusing on energy efficiency projects, including through installing LED bulbs in streetlights. He noted LRG are collaborating with solar farms to meet increasing energy demands caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

David Boys, Deputy General Secretary, Public Services International, a global trade union federation, explained the new coronavirus crisis has elucidated the limits of the market. He said the market’s “invisible hand” has failed and does not work for public service delivery, particularly during the pandemic. He observed the crisis has also brought attention to and respect for the work of previously underappreciated workers. In particular, he mentioned those on the front lines keeping cities and communities functioning despite significant health risks.

Boys noted the pandemic has exacerbated existing austerity measures related to public services. He said this, matched with tax dodging mechanisms for the richest, led to current failures of public systems. Underscoring the need for UN-led reform of the current tax system, he stressed without reform that redirects funds from corporations and the richest individuals to public services, countries will fail to overcome the COVID-19 crisis and recovery challenges.

**Multilevel Territorial Governance and Sustainable Financing**

Session moderator Haoliang Xu, Director, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, UNDP, emphasized that cities have emerged as COVID-19 hot spots. He identified access to financing as a major constraint for LRG. He said this was due, in particular, to the perceived risks when it comes to investing in local markets in the wake of COVID-19, lack of bankable projects and investment opportunities, and unstable market regulations in developing countries. He said the World Bank estimated a 15-20% gap in local financing for 2021. Mentioning the world is losing a forest the size of France every year, he underscored the need for voluntary local reviews to include sustainable management of natural resources. He identified climate change and biodiversity as entry points for tackling other sustainability issues.

UCLG Co-President Thembisile Nkadimeng, Mayor of Polokwane and President of the South African Local Government Association, emphasized the need for strong systems that deliver universal services, including health, housing, food and nutrition, and education. She stressed post-COVID-19 recovery should include investments in a more sustainable and green future. She further called for respecting existing commitments, particularly those in the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Ashok Sridharan, Mayor of Bonn, Germany, and President of ICLEI- Local Governments for Sustainability, said the 2030 Agenda is a multi-level agenda by definition. He urged LRG
to present ambitious commitments during the 26th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Climate Change in Glasgow, UK, in 2021. Sridharan added that the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, expected to be adopted by the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 2021, should elevate the role of LRG in sustainable natural resource management. He further announced the Daring Cities 2020 forum will take place online from 7–28 October 2020.

Claudia López, Mayor of Bogota, Colombia, said cities need new, green, sustainable development agendas moving forward. She mentioned her proposed development plan for the next four years represents a renewed social and environmental contract. She said the plan, submitted to Bogota’s City Council, includes, for the first time, goals related to sustainable transportation and reducing air pollution. She explained the plan also focuses on women and youth. She reminded LRG representatives that the world’s most important challenge is climate change.

Linda Bilmes, Harvard Kennedy School, and UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration, said subnational governments are facing a “perfect economic storm” during the pandemic, whereby revenues for subnational governments represent expenditures for national governments. She also explained that a dollar spent at the local level generates two dollars in economic growth. However, she cautioned that, during the COVID-19 crisis, national governments are reducing their expenditures at the subnational level. She underscored the importance of subnational level spending for achieving the SDGs. She called for providing access to capital for subnational governments.

Célestine Ketcha Courtès, Minister of Housing and Urban Development, Cameroon, called for strong synergies between local and national governments, development partners, and the UN. She mentioned that although COVID-19 has destabilized the planet, it has created an opportunity to rethink ways in which different stakeholders and levels of governments can more effectively work together.

Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, underscored the need to consider accessibility as a crosscutting issue in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. She said cities must be fully accessible to all.

**Building Back Better**

This session was moderated by Elliott Harris, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development and Chief Economist, who reiterated “building back better” means building something new that better responds to the needs of the environment, economies, and societies. He urged finding new ways of communicating and participating to address the inequities that underpin the systemic vulnerabilities that exacerbated the COVID-19 crisis. He said an effective post-COVID-19 recovery will necessitate a multilateral approach based on local governments.

Wim Dries, Mayor of Genk, Belgium, and President, Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities, said if the SDGs had already been achieved, the global health crisis and its social and economic impacts would have been far less severe. He explained COVID-19 acts as a magnifying glass, amplifying areas where the world was already lagging behind, such as health care, reducing inequality and inclusion.

Adriana Allen, President, Habitat International Coalition, underscored the need for new forms of distribution, participation, and parity in political representation in the post-COVID-19 era to build more just, inclusive, and resilient societies. She called for adequately resourced and empowered LRG to craft the needed responses to the COVID-19 crisis and SDG implementation. These responses, she added, must focus on the most vulnerable.

Andrew Wilson, Permanent Observer for the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) to the UN, said the key takeaway from the COVID-19 crisis is that our economic and social systems must incorporate resilience going forward. He explained they must focus on points of fragility, such as economic exclusion, social inequality, and environmental degradation. He observed that “the black swan of this crisis is the ineffectiveness of international cooperation.” Wilson underscored the need to use localization platforms that support small businesses in communities. He added that economic recovery must focus on physical and digital infrastructures for small and medium enterprises, and on providing local authorities with access to finance.
Ilsur Metshin, Mayor of Kazan, Russian Federation, and President of the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities, said the pandemic necessitates replicating and scaling up best practices in the COVID-19 response and in SDG implementation.

Armand Béouindè, Mayor of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and UCLG Africa Vice-President, noted LRG have increased their public expenditures during the COVID-19 crisis. He called for cooperation and support to relaunch their economies to raise much-needed resources for public budgets.

Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi, UCLG Africa Secretary-General, said the UN can demonstrate progress at its 75th Anniversary by bringing LRG to the table. He noted the crisis has shown people are not averse to authorities or the private sector. However, he said they want reforms and more just, inclusive and transparent relationships with authorities and the private sector. He also stressed the need for a renewed, strengthened multilateral system that enables the delivery of global commitments.

Greg Munro, Secretary-General, CLGF, said the multilateral system must address increased centralization of and infringement on human rights as responses to the COVID-19 crisis. He quoted UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, who said “the UN needs local governments more than local governments need the UN.”

Closing Ceremony

Tijjani Muhammad Bande, President of the 74th UN General Assembly, underscored the need for a renewed commitment to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development, to ensure adequate financing for implementation of the SDGs during the post-COVID-19 recovery. He urged the private sector to engage with the UN Global Compact local networks.

Selwin Hart, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General for Climate Action, underscored the pandemic has not changed the international community’s 1.5° temperature goal. However, he explained the way to achieve this goal is to ensure a green post-COVID-19 recovery. He invited LRG to take the lead by mobilizing their citizens to call for bailout plans and stimulus packages that support a green recovery. He also urged LRG to serve as advocates for the UN Secretary-General’s proposed six climate-related actions to shape the COVID-19 recovery. The Secretary-General’s proposed actions emphasize:

• recovery money must deliver new jobs and businesses through a clean, green transition;
• taxpayers’ money toward rescuing businesses must be tied to achieving green jobs and sustainable growth;
• fiscal firepower must drive a shift from a grey to a green economy;
• public funds should flow to sustainable sectors and projects that help the environment and the climate;
• climate risks and opportunities must be incorporated into the financial system, aspects of public policy making, and infrastructure; and
• everyone must work together as an international community.

Antonio de Mello, Coordinator of International Relations, Rio de Janeiro City Hall, Brazil, called for international institutions and development banks to provide credit lines for countries that are epicenters of the pandemic.

Closing the event, Emilia Saiz, UCLG Secretary General, reiterated the call for a more inclusive multilateral system to advance post-COVID-19 recovery efforts and the 2030 Agenda.