

## HLPF 2021 Highlights: Tuesday, 6 July 2021

The 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) opened Tuesday morning with stark statements about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable development. Many speakers noted how the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated systemic inequalities and rolled back decades of progress, pushing more than 100 million people back into poverty.

The day featured both virtual and in-person participation from UN Headquarters. Following the opening plenary's series of keynote addresses, the HLPF featured presentations, panel discussions, and interventions by Member States and other stakeholders on COVID-19 recovery as an opportunity to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that no one is left behind, and building resilience against future shocks through structural changes and investment in sustainable infrastructure.

### Opening Plenary

UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) President Munir Akram (Pakistan) opened the session, noting that COVID-19 has had a devastating impact everywhere, especially on the poorest people and countries. He said that we must be guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development to face current challenges and use the HLPF to demonstrate our unwavering commitment to the 2030 Agenda.

ECOSOC Vice President Juan Sandoval Mendiolea presented key messages from the ECOSOC Integration Segment, including restoring trust in institutions and rebuilding the social compact; leaving no one behind; eliminating inequalities; economic recovery guided by satisfying human needs and the environment; a new more equitable and sustainable model of development; global digital connectivity; high-quality reliable data; finance; and an improved ECOSOC.

Macky Sall, President of Senegal, described his country's approach to COVID-19. He called for equal access to vaccines and additional financing for low-income countries, especially in Africa. He noted the need to overhaul the global economic system, including reform of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) rules on credit export conditions, and clamping down on illicit financial flows and tax evasion. He welcomed the US proposal for a global minimum corporate tax rate.

Tedros Adhanom, Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO), noted that COVID-19 has become an issue of the "haves versus have-nots." He urged for continued commitments through the COVAX initiative to ensure developing countries have access to more vaccines, data, information, resources, and technology and health tools so that every nation can keep its people safe. He said the WHO urges Member States to focus on three key priorities:

1) sharing vaccines; 2) providing financing to ensure countries have the health tools to combat this virus; and 3) sharing mRNA technologies and know-how.

Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director, International Monetary Fund (IMF), drew attention to the fact that for the first time in 20 years, the fight against poverty is falling behind. She described how the IMF analyzed how some countries are falling behind in achieving the SDGs in key areas and encouraged countries to mobilize additional resources and finance, focusing on the private sector to spur growth.

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General, World Trade Organization (WTO), stressed that the WTO has played a crucial role during the pandemic by urging Member States to exercise restraint on restrictions. She called on Member States to free up vaccine supply chains by lowering trade restrictions, work with developing countries to identify supply bottlenecks, and share intellectual property, technology transfer, and knowledge on vaccine production.

Michael Kremer, University of Chicago, Development Innovation Lab, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics and Nobel Laureate 2019, spoke about the role of innovation in promoting sustainable development. He highlighted the position of governments and institutions in providing innovations that address the issues of the global pandemic, both physical and policy innovations.

### ***The SDGs in time of crisis: A sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19 as an opportunity to realize the SDGs***

Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, presented the Secretary-General's report on progress towards the SDGs and measures to realize the SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic. He described how the pandemic has undermined decades of development efforts and stressed: setting equitable conditions for all countries; ensuring that SDG losses from the pandemic do not translate into long-term capacity loss; and leveraging scientific knowledge and new technological developments.

Achim Steiner, Administrator, UN Development Programme, moderated the session. He highlighted upcoming global decision-making opportunities as a "critical juncture" to address the pandemic and the 2030 Agenda.

Tariq Ahmad, Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth, UK, underlined that gender, equality and education are essential to unlocking SDG progress. He stressed the importance of investing in girls' education and pushing COVID-19 vaccination to help children return to school, and drew attention to the upcoming Global Education Summit 2021.

Sania Nishtar, Federal Minister and Special Assistant on Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety, Pakistan, discussed targeted subsidies for small- and medium-sized enterprises, universal health policies, and the importance of data innovation and delivery systems for transformative reform. She noted her

country's work to build financial inclusion into social protection design, put nutrition and financial access to education in the center of its social protection objectives, and scale up conditional cash transfers (CCT).

Birgitta Tazelaar, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands, emphasized the need for strong social protection systems, and underscored CCTs as an effective tool to combat poverty, inequality, and food insecurity. She drew attention to responsible business conduct and “smart-mix” measures, noting that shaping the lives and livelihoods of billions of people are at stake.

Henrietta Fore, Executive Director, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), called for focusing on education and internet connectivity in schools, protecting children from abuse in all its forms, and prioritizing investment in mental health.

Marsha Caddle, Minister of Economic Affairs and Investment, Barbados, stated that island recovery is threatened by the lack of vaccines and associated technologies. She noted her country's ambitious climate mitigation targets, reformed national security system, and tourism subsidies.

Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, noted that the UN regional economic commissions have launched a COVID-19 stimulus tracker in 194 countries, and called for stronger political commitment.

Claudine Uwera, Minister of State, Rwanda, described Rwanda's actions in response to COVID-19, including a national coordination committee, village COVID-19 committees with daily reporting procedures, and training of healthcare providers.

Isaac Alfie, Director of the Office of Planning and Budget, Uruguay, said that his country prioritized education by preserving in-person education and had among the fewest education days lost worldwide. He added health service capacity increased by 50% and two-thirds of the country is vaccinated.

Sofia Sprechmann Sineiro, Secretary General, Care International, highlighted the gender impacts of COVID-19 and called for prioritizing inclusion and equity in the care-giving sector, which represents 9% of global gross domestic production (GDP). She said careworkers must be paid competitive, living wages and enjoy a workplace free of abuse.

Dominic Waughray, World Economic Forum, described public-private partnerships, including the COVID Action Platform, the Mission Possible Partnership to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030, and the Edison Alliance to connect all to the internet.

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, Khazanah Research Institute, stressed vaccine costs have increased due to intellectual property rights and noted the need to avoid problems associated with the “new Cold War” and cooperate to eradicate COVID-19.

In the subsequent discussion, FRANCE highlighted the need to ensure rights of women and girls are respected, accelerate equality between men and women, address debt, and make sure social systems are more resilient. FINLAND reinforced how the pandemic has caused long-term impacts on the world and health systems, reinforcing the need for multilateral efforts particularly the 2030 Agenda.

The PHILIPPINES said universal health care has proven necessary for the full realization of the SDGs. The STAKEHOLDER GROUP OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES emphasized that crisis recovery should be more inclusive of this group at every stage of planning and mobilizing.

SWITZERLAND encouraged a cross-cutting approach and agile public policy engaging diverse stakeholders in pandemic recovery. INDONESIA called for more inclusivity, partnerships, data sharing and innovative financing to recover from the pandemic.

CHINA called for a science-based response to the pandemic and for more countries to join the China-Africa Development Fund to support African recovery. NEPAL suggested the COVID-19 vaccine be treated as a global public good to ensure that no one is left behind.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA highlighted its initiative, Building TRUST (Transparency, Resilience, Unity and Safety Together) to support countries in pandemic recovery and stressed linking a green recovery to all of its efforts. SOUTH AFRICA supported the calls to build back better and reiterated its commitment to solidarity and global efforts to achieve the SDGs.

The MAJOR GROUP ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH described how one in four children in the world's poorest countries are engaged in labor and stressed the fight against climate change and child labor.

Steiner concluded by emphasizing that financing action needs to be taken in a matter of weeks—not years—to help developing countries emerge from this crisis and that the paradigm is no longer “think globally, act locally” but “think locally, act globally.”

### ***Ensuring that no one is left behind***

ECOSOC Vice President Pascale Baeriswyl (Switzerland) opened the session, noting that despite the fact that the principle of leaving no one behind has been key since the inception of the SDGs, “we have not always succeeded in including everyone in this process,” adding poverty has increased and the pandemic has exacerbated many of the world's inequalities.

Jane Barratt, Secretary General, International Federation on Ageing, moderated the session, saying millions of the most vulnerable have been left behind.

Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, focused on a human rights-based approach to recover from the pandemic, recommending increasing social spending, and describing affordable services as a bedrock for more peaceful and successful societies.

Jane Coffin, Senior Vice President, Internet Society, explained that the internet has been a lifeline during the pandemic, serving as a critical enabler of human development. Joshua Phoho Setipa, Managing Director, Technology Bank for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), mentioned challenges that LDCs are facing during the pandemic, including reductions in global trade and tourism.

Fabio Veras, Senior Research Coordinator, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and Institute of Applied Economic Research, focused on the groups that were most affected by the pandemic, “the hard to reach, missing middle,” especially in the Global South. Saad Alfarargi, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, emphasized the need for rapid financial support for developing countries and unconditional grants to meet healthcare needs and create safety nets.

Antonio Vitorino, Director-General, International Organization for Migration, drew attention to the paradox faced by migrant groups in that they are among the most vulnerable to the pandemic but also on the front lines of the response across sectors, including healthcare, homecare and agriculture. Beena Pallical, Executive Director, Asia Dalit Rights Forum, emphasized social protection, survivor-led solutions, and national security schemes that address the most vulnerable. Sarah Adwoa Safo, Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Ghana, supported a call to action for adolescent wellbeing.

In the subsequent discussion, the Hunger Project, Mexico stressed indicators, recognizing diversity in all its dimensions, and social protection systems. SWEDEN underlined the need for technical support to address health. ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM highlighted the importance of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. NORWAY stressed a rules- and human rights-based social contract. FINLAND addressed structural discrimination, human-rights policies, and social protections.

BELGIUM called for policies to address youth employment and mental health. INDONESIA urged for accelerating reforms on social protection, health worker insurance, and access to low-



cost financing. WORLD VISION/TOGETHER 2030 stressed the vulnerability of young people. Referencing the need for integrated data for development. SWITZERLAND drew attention to the upcoming World Data Forum.

After final remarks from the panelists, Barratt closed the session stating that “we have found the best in ourselves during COVID.”

### ***Building resilience against future shocks through structural changes and investment in sustainable infrastructure***

Moderator Atif Kubursi, McMaster University, Canada, opened the panel, noting how the digital and infrastructural divides have hampered our collective security. He underlined the importance of collaboration as a way to prevent this issue in the future.

Isabelle Durant, Secretary-General, UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), described how global investment has shrunk by one-third due to COVID-19. She noted that while governments and businesses have made resilience and sustainability investment priorities, only 10% of these investments have gone to developing countries.

Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Africa, said international cooperation is needed to increase financing and liquidity to create resilience. She noted that Africa has only vaccinated 2% of its population and needs better and cheaper market access to vaccines.

Gavin Power, Executive Vice President, Pacific Investment Management Company LLC (PIMCO), described the role of private capital in mobilizing finance to achieve the SDGs.

Jim Hall, Oxford University, said we need to improve our capacity to anticipate shocks and increase resilience, such as through stress tests for anticipating disasters.

Stephen Devereux, Co-Director, Centre for Social Protection, Institute of Development Studies, highlighted the need to deliver robust systems for the poorest members of society to make them more responsive to shocks and crises and to include low income and informal workers as beneficiaries of public social infrastructure.

Isabel Ortiz, Director, Global Social Justice Program Initiative for Policy Dialogue, described the systemic legacy of the Washington Consensus, which has left developing countries with weak public and social services.

Mami Mizutori, UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, stressed that each dollar invested in infrastructure resilience brings four dollars in benefits, and that the private sector and civil society must be involved in inclusive and resilient infrastructure investment.

Francesco La Camera, Director-General, International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), emphasized that building back better is not just an attractive logo but should be a guiding principle for decision-makers. IRENA, he said, has demonstrated how the drive toward renewable energy does not just respond to climate change, but is an effective catalyst to growth.

Yannick Glemarec, Executive Director, Green Climate Fund, noted the critical role of sustainable infrastructure for building resilience, and the value of recognizing co-benefits among mitigation, adaptation, and sustainable development to develop new climate solutions.

Andre Zhu, Senior Vice President of Global Affairs and General Counsel, Pinduoduo, said online technology is an integral part of resilient food distribution systems and connects local growers directly with consumers.

Refat Sabbah, Education and Academia Stakeholder Group, discussed the importance of values, such as solidarity and trust in times of crisis.

Suran Maharjan, Volunteers Major Group, highlighted the gaps between volunteers, service providers, and policy makers, stating greater continuity is needed to ensure social resilience.

Eamon Ryan, Minister of Transport and Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Ireland, called the state of diplomacy “precarious” and that the developed world must recognize more must be done for the developing world. He added that in the same spirit of cooperation during the pandemic, which protected older generations, we must now pivot to protect younger generations in face of future crises.

In the subsequent interventions, GUYANA encouraged not choosing solutions that are cost-saving but those that guarantee resilient and sustainable solutions, ensuring inequalities are resolved. FRANCE noted that investments in infrastructure are essential, such as public transportation, to combat social inequalities.

THAILAND explained how its universal healthcare system has helped his country during the pandemic. He beseeched multilateral banks to provide infrastructure funding support to developing countries.

THE WORLD FEDERATION OF ENGINEERING ORGANIZATIONS, also on behalf of the INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE COUNCIL, encouraged an interdisciplinary approach and open access to channel the work and research of engineers and scientists towards the achievement of the SDGs.

CHINA stated that the infrastructure gap could be overcome by focusing on education, health, high-speed internet access, and artificial intelligence, among other “people-centric” areas to ensure enhanced connectivity and sustainable infrastructure.

INDONESIA stressed the importance of achieving an equitable economic transformation to strengthen resilience to withstand future shocks and crises, pointing to equal access to internet connectivity, green and resilient infrastructure, clean water, sanitation, and adequate housing.

The SENDAI STAKEHOLDERS GROUP said risk management should be enhanced by including vulnerabilities and hazards in every step of a business model.

Focusing on the private sector, GUATEMALA discussed promoting business innovation in response to the pandemic in line with SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) and SDG 13 (climate action).

In conclusion, panelists emphasized social infrastructure and a blended approach to harness the capacity of volunteers, and the need to go beyond traditional physical and policy infrastructures. Others noted that structural transformation will require more investments, and better-quality public systems are linked to universal health coverage and labor standards. There was also a call for a “stepped up era of partnerships,” that bring development and private sectors’ funding together. Akram summarized the session noting that “we cannot get resilience without resources, and these resources are not equally distributed.”

### ***In the Cyber-Corridors***

Convening for the second time during the COVID-19 pandemic, the HLPF was confronted by a stark message: the pandemic has derailed the achievement of the SDGs and has already undermined decades of development efforts. As the UN Secretary-General’s [report](#) on SDG progress indicates, in 2020 the economic downturn pushed between 119 and 124 million more people into extreme poverty, the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost, and an additional 101 million children and young people fell below the minimum reading proficiency level, wiping out education gains over the previous two decades. It is also estimated that up to 10 million additional girls will be at risk of child marriage in the next decade. As speaker after speaker highlighted what is needed to recover and move forward—including gender equality, rights for caregivers, internet access, shared access to vaccines, science, technology, and sustainable infrastructure, and overhauling the economic system—it is clear there is no silver bullet.