

HLPF 2023 Highlights: Thursday, 13 July 2023

Urban and peri-urban areas are a crucial nexus for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and empowering cities and communities is key to successfully “localizing” the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This was one of the main messages by delegates at the 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) on its fourth day.

Delegates also heard a progress report on the 10-Year Framework of Programmes (10YFP) on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns (SCP) and discussed the special challenges in SDG implementation faced by middle-income countries (MICs), Africa, least developed countries (LDCs) and landlocked developing countries (LLDCs).

Progress Report on the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns

Armanatha Christiawan Nasir (Indonesia), Vice President, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), opened the session, noting that while Goal 12 (sustainable consumption and production) is not under review this year, it is an important enabler for other SDGs and targets.

Giovanna Valverde, Co-Chair, 10YFP Board, highlighted the report’s five calls to action:

- convening a multilateral and multistakeholder dialogue process under the aegis of the UN Environment Assembly and ECOSOC and reporting to HLPF or the UN General Assembly;
- focusing on high-impact industry sectors;
- harnessing digital technologies;
- strengthening public awareness of sustainable lifestyles; and
- prioritizing policies that foster SCP along the entire lifecycle of products and services.

SDG 11 and Interlinkages with other SDGs –Sustainable Cities and Communities

Sokunpanha You, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), presented the highlights of the report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the SDGs, focusing on SDG 11.

Stefano Marta, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), moderated the panel. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, pointed to evidence of a growing urban divide that requires rethinking how we plan and manage our human settlements. Stressing that the New Urban Agenda (NUA) offers a clear vision, targets and commitments, she urged stakeholders to adopt high impact solutions.

Ana Ciuti, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Argentina, focused on cities’ growing leadership in combatting climate change. Citing barriers in accessing finance as a key limitation, she highlighted

an initiative by Ahmedabad, India; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Buenos Aires, Argentina, that aims to leverage ongoing multilateral financial system reforms to increase climate financing for cities.

António Vitorino, Director General, International Organization for Migration, underscored the positive linkages between human mobility and economic growth. Recalling the high number of pledges made by cities and local communities to the Global Compact’s Multi-Partner Trust Fund, he stressed that migrants and local authorities must have a seat at the table.

Maruxa Cardama, Secretary General, Partnership on Sustainable, Low Carbon Transport, lamented that only 51.6% of the urban population has access to formal or informal public transport, with spillover effects across numerous SDGs. She advocated, among other things:

- increased capacity building on integrated, proximity-based transport models, such as the “15-Minute City”;
- promotion of safe walking and cycling infrastructure; and
- facilitating less car-dependent lifestyles that foster more democratic public resource allocation.

Marc Workman, CEO, World Blind Union, noted people with disabilities rely heavily on public transportation and stressed the need for accessibility and localization to be achieved through: meaningful participation and engagement, alignment of multilevel governance policies and standards, and disaggregated data to identify accessibility barriers.

Paul Stout, content creator, TikTok account TalkingCities, USA, stressed housing and cost of living crises faced by youth and, noting monetary and environmental costs of car-dependent development patterns, called for greener and denser urbanization.

In subsequent discussion, 46 delegates offered insights on how to drive progress and increase social and ecological resilience in cities, emphasizing that urban transformation requires addressing cities’ disproportionate material and energy use and consumption patterns.

Delegates highlighted multi-governance level strategies, programmes and partnerships, with many detailing the realized benefits of and needs for localized action. Some suggested providing more opportunities for local governments to participate in multilateral processes.

Delegates addressed using zero-waste and energy-saving strategies and innovative digitalization solutions in parallel to action on SDG 11, and the need to deal with all 17 SDGs as cohesive and interrelated.

Many speakers also mentioned efforts to achieve sustainable urbanization and address housing crises, which include subsidized housing for young families and rent control, risk-management systems, circularity, urban reforestation, and social cohesion. They also stressed the need for more open and green spaces, improved accessibility and air quality, sustainable and carbon-free building techniques.

Many welcomed outcomes from the second session of the UN-Habitat Assembly, particularly the resolution on adequate housing for all; voiced their continued support for implementing the NUA; and noted the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and Geneva Cities Hub.

Some delegates highlighted the advantages of onboarding all members of society, noting the role of youth and volunteers in promoting active citizenship that contributes to building sustainable cities and better, more integrated and accessible partnerships.

Several speakers stressed the relevance of progressing on SDG 11 for refugees, migrants and other forcibly displaced populations, noting these groups predominantly live in informalized urban environments. They called for local governments to work closely with these groups and others in developing solutions.

Delegates further called for:

- upgrading informal urban settlements;
- mobilizing the political will to ensure equal access to basic services such as clean water and energy, decent housing, and to address disparate benefit-sharing;
- mainstreaming biodiversity and ecosystem services into local-level planning;
- reconciling the often-conflicting priorities among the SDGs;
- creating self-organized, democratic and transparent youth councils, with clear roles in decision-making processes and sufficient resources to be impactful;
- prioritizing infrastructure that promotes nature-based solutions and scaled-up investment, with increased focus on energy, building and transport infrastructures, which are among the most resource- and carbon-intensive sectors;
- integrating sustainable agro-food systems in urban development plans and programmes;
- adopting integrated urban hydro-meteorological, climate and environmental services for cities, with a focus on early warning systems;
- increasing international cooperation in urban densification research; and
- considering the option of small modular reactors to power cities.

In her closing reflections, Sharif said the discussion had revealed the global housing crisis as an emergency and affirmed that addressing the housing crisis is a top priority for UN-Habitat. Ciuti described recent financing initiatives by Barbados and France as offering an opportunity for cities and local governments to advance climate action. Noting that 60% of migrants globally live in cities, Vittorino lauded the leadership displayed by local government actors to tackle migration issues at the multilateral level. Cardama touched on informality as an important blind spot in the debate, stating the informal sector provides the bulk of transport and other services for poor urban dwellers, concluding, “unless we provide transport options that work for the majority, our cities will not work.”

Overcoming Middle-income Countries’ Challenges in Advancing the 2030 Agenda

Paula Narváez (Chile), Vice President, ECOSOC, chaired this session. Panel moderator Omar Hilale, Chair, Like-Minded Group of Countries Supporters of Middle-Income Countries (MICs), called for: better understanding of MICs’ multidimensional vulnerabilities and structural gaps; genuine and inclusive international cooperation; and coordinated, adapted support from the UN system.

Homi Kharas, Brookings Institution, suggested MICs experienced a “seemingly permanent shock” from the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted barriers to MICs’ sustainable economic growth, including high interest rates forcing expanded investment

in fossil fuels where no offsetting aid exists, and to their viable, systematic transformation for achieving Agenda 2030.

Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, underscored MICs’ debt crisis has real human costs and causes socioeconomic upheaval across borders. She urged decisive action by the international community on:

- reforming global financial architecture;
- increasing shares of concessional loans to MICs portfolios and targeting needs-based rather than GDP-based sustainable finance; and
- debt alleviation mechanisms, such as debt swaps in the climate fiscal space.

Fiona Tregenna, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, called for a stop to GDP-focused policy and finance, suggesting using measures of growth such as the Human Development Index. She urged advanced economies to share technology and ensure MICs’ access to their markets to enable MICs achievement of the SDGs while allowing them to catch up economically in an inclusive and sustainable way.

Noting MICs are home to much of the world’s marginalized communities, Adrian Lasimbang, Board Member, Right Energy Partnership with Indigenous Peoples, Malaysia, called for more domestic direct investment and innovative service delivery models to improve access, like mobile healthcare initiatives, to halt poverty cycles and close the digital divide.

Mishell Naomi Cabezas Vilela, Merchan Law Firm, Ecuador, called for MIC governments to prioritize domestic resource mobilization and upscale investment in accessible, modern education infrastructure, noting education fosters critical thinking and empowers individuals.

In subsequent discussion, delegates welcomed having a MIC session on the HLPF agenda for the first time and suggested a periodic examination of MICs’ progress.

Most delegates called for an intergovernmental process and introduction of multidimensional poverty and vulnerability indexes in addition to GDP for better allocation of development financing.

Delegates mentioned poverty and rising inequality, tight fiscal space and high-cost external debt, climate change, corruption, and lack of transparency and participation, as among the national challenges MICs face when implementing SDGs. Proposed solutions included:

- South-South and triangular cooperation;
- fostering regional and global partnerships;
- sharing best practices;
- investment in education, health, transparency, and sustainable infrastructure;
- strengthening social support for the most vulnerable and increasing access to jobs;
- economic diversification and fair trade;
- democratization and good governance;
- collection, analysis, and dissemination of data; and
- closing gender and digital gaps.

In closing remarks, Hilale stressed the role of the UN Secretariat in developing suggestions. Dashti called for a coalition of coordinated voices for a dialogue between MICs and developed countries.

African Countries, Least Developed Countries and Landlocked Developing Countries: Turning the Tide, Regaining Lost Ground and Embarking on the Road to the SDGs

Session Chair Lachezara Stoeva, President of ECOSOC, invited panelists and delegates to share examples of policies, measures and actions underway to improve the lives of the most vulnerable

in this cluster of countries that are among the most marginalized in the world economy and furthest behind in achieving the SDGs.

In a keynote address, Rabab Fatima, High Representative for the LDCs, LLDCs and Small Island Developing States, noted that the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as rising indebtedness, had exacerbated already worrying trends, with more than 32 million people being pushed into extreme poverty in 2020 alone. She urged, among other immediate actions: making full use of the Doha Programme of Action for LDCs (DPoA) and other tailor-made initiatives; operationalizing climate change adaptation and loss and damage funding targets; and continuing reforms to global financial architecture.

Delegates watched a video by the International Organization of Employers on their partnership to develop a five-point private sector strategy to advance the DPoA.

Mavis Owusu-Gyamfi, Executive Vice President, African Center for Economic Transformation, moderated the panel.

Namira Negm, Director, African Union Migration Observatory, discussed ongoing efforts by African countries to address the region's vulnerability to multiple crises, including: convening the first African Climate Summit in September 2023; and diverse programmes to boost regional trade and strengthen physical and digital infrastructure. Stressing that the region cannot do it alone, she urged partners to support efforts to maximize the value of Africa's rich natural endowments.

Dulguun Damdin-Od, Executive Director, International Think Tank for LLDCs, highlighted six priorities proposed in the 2014 Vienna Programme of Action, including the transition to affordable and clean energy, ramping up regional trade, and strengthening air transport.

Dima Al-Khatib, Director, UN Office for South-South Cooperation, outlined some transformative actions to advance the SDGs, notably:

- supporting resilience and sustainability;
- resource mobilization and access to innovative finance;
- promotion of trade investment and regional collaboration;
- climate action;
- strengthening digital connectivity and digital skills; and
- partnerships targeting young people.

Yacouba Ibrahim Oumarou, Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent, Niger, called for recognition of historically marginalized communities in the Sahel region, stressing that investment must not only focus on basic services but on the role of culture and arts in "finding a common language" to counter oppression.

Two discussants, Rwodah Al-Naimi, Strategic Partnership Department Manager, Qatar Fund for Development, and Humphrey Mrema, Chairman, Youth Survival Organization and Youth4Climate Advisory, offered additional perspectives. Al-Naimi discussed opportunities offered by the DPoA, while Mrema underscored the need for systemic action to prevent the "tokenization" of youth participation.

Summing up the panel discussion, moderator Owusu-Gyamfi noted that in light of the ongoing polycrisis, which disproportionately affects the most vulnerable countries and communities, it is critical to: strengthen collaboration and solidarity across countries and regions; ensure a stronger voice for the most excluded in global discussions; and incorporate the perspectives of women and young people.

In subsequent interventions by delegates, suggestions for meeting the needs of LDCs included, among other actions: expanding trade access; pursuing debt relief; and including at least USD 100 billion in Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). Some suggested that turbocharging the SDG process in these countries requires, among other actions:

- building a more equitable international financial system;
- working with public and private partners to mobilize sustainable financing across all the SDGs; and
- investing in clean energy and other "solutions for the future."

Many delegates voiced support for the DPoA and the Vienna Programme of Action to support SDGs implementation in LDCs and LLDCs accordingly, as well as the Istanbul Program of Action to develop LDCs' productive capabilities and the UN Secretary-General's call for SDG Stimuli. Delegates also called for a Debt Restructuring Agreement for LDCs, LLDCs, and African countries, and for increased financial support through official development assistance, foreign direct investment, and concessional and blended finance. Some delegates highlighted capacity-building support their countries provide, including through the Türkiye-Africa Partnership, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the EU's Global Gateway programme.

Participants stressed the importance of the energy transition, closing the digital divide, building up scientific and technological capacities, nontariff measures to stimulate transit and trade, and domestic resource mobilization. They emphasized the role of partnerships, stakeholder participation, South-South and triangular cooperation, and importance of sustainable agri-food systems, manufacturing, and services.

Some delegates stressed the importance of promoting gender equality and inclusion of youth and children, dignified sufficiently paid jobs with social protection, and cautioned against marginalizing Indigenous Peoples as a trade-off in achieving SDGs. Some suggested youth priorities for implementing the DPoA, including:

- access to quality education and internships to expand employment opportunities;
- support for entrepreneurship;
- ensuring that no young people are left behind; and
- ensuring meaningful youth participation, including refugees and internally displaced people.

In closing remarks, Negm called for a realistic change in the dynamics of international cooperation and investment in real development. Oumarou highlighted the benefits of increasing internet access in Africa, Damdin-Od stressed air transport is a promising mode of connectivity among LLDCs, and Al-Khatib called for leveraging South-South and triangular cooperation. Closing the session, moderator Owusu-Gyamfi stressed the importance of collaboration, South-South and triangular cooperation, and fair global financial architecture.

In the Corridors

Four days into HLPF, with the high-level segment looming, attention is increasingly turning to the "what next" questions. Inevitably, these involve clarity about what discussions here will mean ahead of the SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future. With a commonly heard concern these past few days, now voiced in plenary today, about the discussions' non-interactive nature, it is unclear how the messages and calls to action addressed so far will be channeled to state leaders' ears. These questions are further amplified considering the many interventions this week that have stressed that "we know what the challenges are, we have the solutions, what we need is action." This gap between review and clearly set out "next steps" is all the more pronounced considering the SDG Summit in September is due to agree an actionable plan. By the end of the day the draft Political Declaration to be adopted at the Summit began circulating, subject to adoption by the silence procedure during the period Wednesday, 19 July to Friday, 21 July, setting the stage for possibly livelier discussions next week during the high-level segment.

