

HLPF 2025 Highlights: Tuesday, 15 July 2025

The 2025 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) opened with a progress review of the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5 - gender equality). In the afternoon, delegates discussed SDG performance in African countries, Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), and Middle-Income Countries (MICs).

SDGs in focus

SDG 5 and interlinkages with other SDGs – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls: Chair Bob Rae, President, ECOSOC, opened the session, inviting delegates to focus on concrete solutions to tackle persistent barriers as well as emerging challenges in achieving women's empowerment.

Following the screening of a short video summarizing key findings on SDG 5 from the 2025 SDG progress report, Moderator Jan Beagle, Director General, International Development Law Organization (IDLO), introduced the panel. She observed that 30 years since the adoption of the landmark Beijing Declaration, women's legal protection remains uneven, and implementation is weak in most countries. She emphasized that closing the gender justice gap, particularly through action on gender-based violence, could be a gamechanger by "letting women live free from fear."

Sima Sami Bahous, Executive Director, UN Women, said the ongoing UN80 initiative and associated multilateral reform initiatives offer an opportunity to accelerate progress by making the UN more efficient and impactful for women and girls.

Albert Motivans, Head, Data and Insights, Equal Measures 2030, stressed the importance of developing value propositions to engage those working on the ground, and described the UN Development Programme (UNDP) social priority maps as a useful tool for a supporting mobilization across sectors.

Citing education as a major barrier in advancing gender equality, Zara Khanna, Youth Ambassador, She Loves Tech, stressed the importance of including access to education and AI-powered learning programmes, while accelerating connectivity.

Fer Ghanaa Ansari, Senior Officer, International Advocacy, Musawa, discussed the impact of customary and religious-based discriminatory laws that continue to harm girls and women.

In subsequent reflections Motivans highlighted elevating women and girls' leadership and voice; ensuring monitoring and accountability; adopting gender-responsive budgets; and investing in public infrastructure, including care.

Touching on links with the Pact for the Future, which was adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future, Bahous emphasized the importance of reducing efforts duplication and building synergies with other SDGs.

In the ensuing interactive discussion, delegates stressed that gender equality is a fundamental human right and a precondition for societies to prosper and achieve social and economic stability and peace. THE LGTBQI STAKEHOLDER GROUP, with others, reminded participants that human rights must be recognized and protected for all genders. RUSSIA called the use of the term

"gender" rather than "biological sex" a "step backward" for achieving SDG 5.

Among persistent challenges, delegates highlighted:

- barriers to accessing education and labor markets;
- policy backtracking, especially pushback against access to sexual and reproductive health services;
- gender-based violence and harmful cultural norms and practices, such as early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and discriminatory laws and policies;
- lack of recognition and compensation for women's unpaid care work; and
- disproportionate suffering of women and girls in conflicts and disasters.

Several speakers cited good returns from investing in women and girls' education, in such areas as classroom safety, teacher training, and support for health and nutrition workers.

Other progressive measures outlined included:

- targeted programmes supporting women entrepreneurs and flexible work models for women;
- providing access to digital technologies, particularly in remote areas;
- investments in the care economy; and
- enhancing women's access to finance, especially for those in vulnerable situations, and providing debt relief to countries complying with specific gender equality targets.

THE HOLY SEE called for consideration and protection of family roles and relational elements in addition to gender equality at the individual level. KYRGYZSTAN proposed an international platform on women and youth in mountainous rural areas.

The UN OFFICE FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION underscored that the compounding effect of disasters on gender inequality is socially constructed and can be changed. CZECHIA called for international action against the global "manosphere" backlash against gender equality and digital hate speech against women in public roles.

Accelerating SDG achievement in African countries, LDCs, LLDCs and MICs

African countries, LDCs, and LLDCs: Opening the discussion, Chair Rae outlined some unique challenges faced by this disparate group of countries, noting the need for tailored solutions.

Moderator Cristina Duarte, UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Africa, asked panelists to offer insights on, among other questions: how to accelerate inclusive economic growth; build resilience against economic and environmental shocks; and effective and innovative financing and partnership models to expand the shrinking fiscal space in these countries.

Rabab Fatima, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS and Secretary-General of the Third UN Conference on Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDC3), welcomed the recent adoption of the Awaza Programme of Action, in addition to the existing the Doha Programme of Action, as an important mechanism to tackle entrenched challenges faced by these countries.

Nosipho Jezile, Chairperson, Committee on World Food Security (CFS), highlighted the importance of aligning global

actions, achieving greater global convergence to reshape partnerships, and ensuring the implementation of existing frameworks.

Landry Signé, Brookings Institution, emphasized that bridging the gap between policy intentions and implementation requires adequate resources. He drew attention to the role played by the private sector.

Under Secretary-General Fatima announced the forthcoming LLDC3 conference in Awaza, Turkmenistan, noting it will advance concrete deliverables of the new LLDC Programme of Action, including establishment of a formal LLDC negotiating group.

Jezile said the CFS's normative instruments, including guidelines on the right to food, women's empowerment, and food security and climate change, all enable advancement of the SDGs. She drew attention to the second UN Food Systems Summit Stocktake (UNFSS+4), to be co-hosted by Ethiopia and Italy in late July 2025.

Signé underscored the role of science and technology including, among other areas, enhancing AI capacity, supporting technology startups, cyber security, and enhancing human capacities and agile governance to handle challenges.

Discussant Robert Akoto Amofo, African regional chapter of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA), called for transparency mechanisms and strengthened capacity for judicial and government institutions fighting corruption and countering discrimination, particularly against the LGBTI community.

NEPAL, for LDCs, called for innovative financing partnerships alongside debt restructuring and relief.

BOLIVIA, for LLDCs, highlighted structural disadvantages faced by the group, including high trade costs due to the lack of access to the sea. He called for enhancing political will to implement the new LLDC Plan of Action.

FINLAND noted their support of the LDC Future Forum that convened in Zambia in April 2025. TÜRKIYE stressed its close relationship with African and LLDC partners, saying the Turkish Cooperation Agency actively strengthens primary health care systems in partner countries and offers LLDCs a corridor to Europe.

IDLO stressed legal support for LDCs to develop enforceable laws to attract investment.

Middle Income Countries (MICs): Opening this panel discussion, Chair Rae noted that more than half the world's countries are classified as MICs.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), highlighted the adoption of comprehensive strategics, including assessments beyond GDP, reforming the international financial architecture, and enhancing South-South and triangular cooperation.

John McArthur, Director, Center for Sustainable Development, emphasized the role of digital technologies in overcoming structural barriers for sustainable growth in MICs. He stressed the need for "bigger, faster, and better investment," noting it is essential to integrate new technologies in finance.

Lead discussant Naveen Gautam, Global Forum of Communities Discriminated Against on Work and Descent Youth, drew attention to the discrimination against marginalized groups face in MICs, especially youth, calling for designated funding and increased representation and participation.

In the ensuing discussion, the UN SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR AFRICA said MICs risk losing access to concessional loans before they can access other sources of finance.

LAO PDR, KYRGYSTAN, TIMOR LESTE, and RWANDA outlined development strategies, underscoring people-centered, locally grounded and inclusive SDG implementation, long-term support, and partnerships.

THE PHILIPPINES welcomed LDC leadership at the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development and expressed commitment to collaborate with LDCs. THAILAND outlined its "sufficiency economy" philosophy.

NORWAY, SAUDI ARABIA, and PORTUGAL highlighted their contribution to international development partnerships. The HOLY SEE urged immediate debt relief for poverty reduction.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH urged including young people's voices in implementation, not only in negotiation of declarations.

THE INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY outlined nuclear technologies for plant breeding, energy, zoonotic diseases, and health care.

Other issues highlighted in the discussion included how to address the paradox that being a MIC limits access to needed finance to bridge widening social inequalities. Speakers also touched on:

- the MIC's Plan of Action as a framework for South-South and triangular cooperation, prioritizing infrastructure, connectivity, and trade;
- the need to build resistance to climate shocks and related disasters, including through strengthening early warning systems; and
- enhancing multistakeholder partnerships to execute action-oriented strategies and leave no one behind;

THE PHILIPPINES offered to share its Vision 2040: The Life Filipinos Want.

THE Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reaffirmed its commitment to countries that continue to face climate shocks and related disasters.

ITALY said the Secretary-General's report on the SDGs resembles Italy's Mattei Plan, including in promoting AI for sustainable development and technical capacity, and catalyzing transformative development.

SOUTH AFRICA, HONDURAS, LEBANON, JAMAICA, and BELARUS, welcomed the Sevilla Commitment as an opportunity to overhaul financial support and investment for MICs. LEBANON and JAMAICA called for support for countries in special circumstances. COSTA RICA urged innovative finance to overcome the middle-income trap. UNICEF highlighted that countries require debt relief to invest in children.

SPAIN, COSTA RICA, LEBANON, CHILE, and HONDURAS urged establishing metrics beyond GDP to reflect the complexities of MICs' economies and their needs.

THE AGEING STAKEHOLDER GROUP said MICs should plan for demographic transitions and support for older people to lay the foundation for future growth. The WORKERS AND TRADE STAKEHOLDER GROUP called for just taxation and policies that guarantee full employment. The SOVEREIGN ORDER OF MALTA proposed community-led solutions, enhancing local food systems and supporting displaced people.

UNIDO underscored the importance of creating manufacturing jobs for structural transformation and called for a fourth industrial development decade for Africa.

In the Corridors

HLPF 2025 has settled into the familiar hectic schedule of plenary reviews of five spotlight SDGs, informal negotiations on the ministerial declaration to be adopted during the high-level session, and an array of special events including side events, exhibitions, and other discussions. In the corridors, the inclusiveness of HLPF process became a trending topic. Some participants noted that the voice of civil society is clearly being heard, with recognition of several new Stakeholder Groups and more grassroots representatives taking the floor in plenary sessions. Others pointed to the growing profile of multistakeholder Voluntary National Review (VNR) Labs being organized on the sidelines of the formal sessions.

One seasoned observer noted, however, that despite some groups receiving more airtime, the number of civil society representatives attending HLPF and civil society-led side events has been on a downward trend in recent years. Reflecting on this point, one civil society participant pondered whether the growing focus on multistakeholder coordination can help compensate for the overall decline in broad-based engagement, and, what this might ultimately mean for delivery on the ground. It will be interesting to see what this year's review of SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals) will reveal about the reality of SDG collaboration "in the real world."