

HLPF 2025 Highlights: Thursday, 17 July 2025

Discussions on the fourth day of the 2025 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) focused on a review of SDG 14 (life below water), which many delegates referred to as the most underfunded SDG despite the importance of the Ocean for human wellbeing. In the afternoon, a thematic session with Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGoS) explored how multilateralism can be renewed and strengthened to deliver on the promises of the 2030 Agenda. The final segment addressed how local action can drive transformative change.

SDGs in Focus

SDG 14 and interlinkages with other SDGs – Life below water: Moderator Kiliparti Ramakrishna, Director of Marine Policy Center, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, asked panelists to reflect on obstacles and new opportunities.

Elizabeth McLeod, Global Ocean Director, The Nature Conservancy, highlighted the finance gap, fragmented governance, and failure to empower coastal communities, noting that Ocean funding should reflect the size of the Blue Economy.

Editruidith Lukanga, Secretary-General, African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHNET/WFF), called for empowering small-scale fishing communities by embedding the [FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries](#) in Ocean policies and action, noting they address tenure, safety, fair market access, and women's roles from a human rights perspective.

Charles Tellier, Deputy to the Special Envoy of France for the third UN Ocean Conference (UNOC 3), outlined the need for a science-policy-society interface that can connect Ocean action to the latest data, information, and knowledge.

Sophika Kostyniuk, Managing Director, Aquatic Life Institute, underscored safeguarding aquatic animal welfare to avoid unnecessary suffering from wasteful and destructive fishing practices, such as bottom trawling, and reduce Ocean pollution.

During the interactive discussion, delegates noted national efforts, including expanding marine protected areas, banning single-use plastics, marine spatial planning, protecting mangrove ecosystems, and science-based tools for Ocean protection. CHILDREN AND YOUTH called for increasing the target for Ocean protection to 60%.

Many noted interlinkages between SDG 14 and other SDGs, calling for a “broader integrated approach.” Several pointed to the impacts of Ocean collapse on food security and health. Many called for investment in human capacity, with others underscoring the importance of traditional knowledge. Several stressed the role of traditional communities and Indigenous Peoples in protecting the Ocean, with some highlighting the importance of integrated Ocean governance and research.

The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), noted that “funds are being taken from sustainable development to put into conflict.” FINLAND called the next replenishment of the Global Environment Facility “an opportunity to give more.” Delegates also supported relevant international agreements, including the

Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction ([BBNJ Agreement](#)), the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, and the ongoing negotiation process towards an international agreement on plastics, noting their importance for UNOC 3 follow up. The INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY highlighted nuclear and isotope techniques to study human impacts on the marine environment, including tracking microplastic pollution and Ocean acidification.

Some referred to tackling illegal fishing, with NORWAY welcoming the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's new [Recommendation of the Council on Eliminating Government Support to Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing](#). INTERPOL reaffirmed its support to states seeking law enforcement and criminal justice.

Many delegates supported a precautionary moratorium on deep sea mining.

Some speakers underscored that women and youth are on the front lines of Ocean-based livelihoods but are often ignored in marine policy and governance. WOMEN called for a feminist water-based ecological governance model, to replace the current extractionist one. CHILDREN AND YOUTH called for a mechanism for coastal communities' loss and damage.

Many stressed the need for inclusive approaches involving youth and communities to drive sustainable development. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES called for a human rights-based approach, including structural transformation, legal reforms, and financing, and not just reference to Indigenous knowledge.

The ASSOCIATION OF CARIBBEAN STATES, called for collective action to address climate impacts on the Sargasso Sea. AOSIS requested assistance for infrastructure, technology and capacity building. AUSTRIA highlighted landlocked countries' dependence on and responsibility for protecting the Ocean.

The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) outlined the links between Ocean ecosystems and disaster exposure, calling for risk-informed development planning.

Delivering the 2030 Agenda: Aligning Global Processes Through Inclusive Multilateralism

Representatives of Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) presented a guide to the HLPF negotiations co-developed by ECOSOC, DESA and MGoS.

Moderator Rashima Kwatra, Co-Chair, MGoS Coordination Mechanism, highlighted the power of inclusive multilateralism and stakeholder participation, stressing that “a deeper crisis is not financial but moral,” and we should “not confuse efficiency with justice” while seeking to revitalize multilateralism.

Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), underscored that inclusive multilateralism is central to ending HIV, highlighting the pivotal role of civil society advocacy in driving down costs of new treatments.

Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, Deputy Executive Director for Normative Support, UN System Coordination, and Programme Results, UN Women, called feminist and grassroots movements

“the voice of accountability.” She affirmed UN Women’s aim to support their ability to contribute, pointing to establishment of the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women.

Zingiswa Losi, President, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), said trade unions cannot allow right-wing movements and corporate power to dismantle the basis of the UN, noting that trade unions support Agenda 2030 implementation in areas such as: decent jobs; living wages; universal social protection; workers’ rights, including freedom of association and collective bargaining rights; inclusion in decision making; and equality.

Best Chitsanupong Nithiwana, Human Rights Officer, Global Action for Trans Equality (GATE), presented her personal story as a trans woman growing up in Thailand. She decried the marginalization of LGBTIQI and young people, stating “you messed with the wrong generation.”

Sergio Colina Martín, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, Spain, stressed the importance of a participatory space for civil society and academia to ensure that the global agenda responds to the demands and needs of all communities.

Dino Corell, International Labour Organization (ILO), suggested that the ILO’s unique tripartite structure offers a practical example of what inclusive governance can look like.

Amanda Rives, Together 2030 Stakeholder Group, said that, from a humanitarian perspective, multilateralism is not just a diplomatic ideal but a concrete lifeline for the world’s most vulnerable people. She called for greater engagement with local and faith-based actors who “respond first and stay longest,” in crisis situations.

During the interactive discussion, many countries expressed their support for multistakeholder collaboration and multilateralism, highlighting initiatives such as:

- support for youth delegates to actively contribute to multilateral processes;
- advancing green economy and blended finance;
- fostering South-South and triangular cooperation, including through volunteering initiatives; and
- strengthening equitable and multi-level partnerships bringing together governments, civil society, the private sector, academia, youth and other stakeholders.

One speaker described the [Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean](#) (the Escazú Agreement) as a good example of multilateral governance.

SLOVAKIA called on governments to match words with political will and “real investments” for civil society participation at regional and global fora. The UK supported civil society access to the UN General Assembly and other high-level conferences.

Among MGoS speakers, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES called for land policy reforms that recognize and safeguard land tenure on ancestral land, including for women, and provide space for culturally relevant programmes at the local level. PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT urged efforts to protect hard-won language in international agreements. They lauded Brazilian civil society for continuing to produce shadow SDG reviews during a period of political uncertainty.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH noted their constituency comprises more than 20,000 youth organizations engaged in over 60 intergovernmental and 200 multistakeholder processes, describing the ECOSOC Youth Forum as one of the most visible examples of youth engagement. The CIVIL SOCIETY FINANCE FOR DEVELOPMENT MECHANISM called for coalitions of the willing to maintain multilateral initiatives where these are under threat, urging the creation of a UN convention on development cooperation, to acknowledge that development assistance “is not generosity but an overdue obligation.”

Concluding the session, Moderator Kwatra said the session was a rallying call for a multilateralism that remains accountable to “We the People.”

Transformation from the Ground Up: Acting at Local Level

Moderator Emilia Saiz, Secretary-General, United Cities and Local Governments, recalled that 65% of SDG targets require local action, noting that increasing numbers of countries include local and regional governments in their voluntary national reviews (VNRs).

Carmen Paz, Mayor, San Nicolás, Honduras, discussed how local SDG action led to SDG-aligned community plans, strengthened local data, facilitated gender-sensitive budgeting, and enhanced women’s participation in decision-making processes.

Tebogo Matlou, South Africa Local Government Association, said his organization brings policy intervention and planning together through partnerships with government departments and participatory governance. He said the SDGs address major problems that cannot be tackled through voluntary measures alone.

Nazia Rehman, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe, shared examples of local leadership programmes, noting lessons learned on the need for adequate resources and building trust. While welcoming the growing use of AI at the local level, she urged caution to avoid creating digital divides.

Rudolf Heinrich Bühler, Bäuerliche Erzeugergemeinschaft Schwäbisch Hall, on behalf of FARMERS, underscored the significance of localizing SDGs and adopting a community-based approach, mentioning the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas](#) as an essential framework to protect basic rights of farmers.

During the ensuing discussions, delegates emphasized empowering local communities, fostering participation, and promoting stakeholder cooperation as key strategies for transformation. MALTA proposed youth involvement through education and advocacy, while TIMOR-LESTE stressed meaningful participation and gender equality. ITALY highlighted police coherence. Common themes included supporting capacity building, tracking progress, and ensuring inclusive decision-making.

The VOLUNTEER STAKEHOLDER GROUP underscored the growing importance of volunteerism amid contracting official development assistance. MEXICO, GUATEMALA, INDIA, TURKIYE, and GHANA highlighted their localization initiatives including conducting collaborative voluntary local reviews, making room for women’s and Indigenous Peoples’ participation in policymaking, and developing local monitoring tools to support evidence-based decision making.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH demanded an immediate global humanitarian ceasefire and urged ensuring youth engagement regardless of refugee or displaced status.

COSTA RICA called for more locally-derived data, not just information on “national averages.”

In the Corridors

With the review of the five spotlight SDGs completed, the links between this process and a multiplicity of other multilateral negotiations has become increasingly clear. During the session on SDG 14, for example, delegates stressed the importance of strengthening the follow-up to the UN Ocean Conference held in June through support to existing and new multilateral instruments such as the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, the BBNJ Agreement, and the global plastics treaty under negotiation. Another delegate pointed to parallels with Wednesday’s session on SIDS and Least Developed Countries, during which delegates repeatedly referenced the outcome of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and made strong calls for redesigning the global financial system.

It is not surprising that Thursday afternoon’s vibrant exchange with Major Groups and other Stakeholders – with its calls for restoring trust in multilateralism and building a new social contract – is similarly turning attention to the forthcoming World Summit for Social Development.