

HLPF 2021 Highlights: Wednesday, 14 July 2021

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development stresses the importance of the regional and sub-regional dimensions in follow-up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since the creation of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), the UN Regional Commissions have organized forums for regional follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. On Wednesday, the first session focused on messages from the regions on how to improve recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic while injecting momentum into the attainment of the SDGs. The remainder of the day featured ten presentations of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) from China, Afghanistan, Denmark, Thailand, Chad, Norway, Bahamas, Tunisia, Dominican Republic, and Sierra Leone.

Messages from the Regions

This session, moderated by Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), opened with a short video highlighting key regional challenges. The Chairs of the 2021 Regional Forums on Sustainable Development then reported on the recommendations from their meetings.

Arlette Soudan-Nonault, Minister of Environment, Sustainable Development and the Congo Basin, Republic of the Congo, said the 7th Africa Regional Forum urged African countries to invest in research and innovation, and implement measures to boost domestic resource mobilization, while inviting development partners to mobilize financing to fight climate change and implement the SDGs.

Rodolfo Solano Quirós, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship of Costa Rica, reported on the 4th Latin America and the Caribbean Forum that stressed the need to increase climate ambitions and move to carbon neutrality, mobilize more resources to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, and coordinate a regional response to the pandemic.

Mereseini Rakuita Vuniwaqa, Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, Fiji, said the 8th session of the Asia-Pacific Forum identified policy measures to achieve the SDGs, including accelerated digitization, building resilience, engaging

with civil society and other stakeholders, and strengthening regional collaboration.

Faisal Al Ibrahim, Minister of Economy and Planning, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, said the 2021 Arab Forum called for greater social protection systems, quality education, investment in science and innovation, universal healthcare, gender equality, protection for migrants, and increasing the size of the civic space to include all stakeholders.

Francisco André, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Portugal, and László Borbély, State Counsellor to the Prime Minister, Romania, presented conclusions from the 2021 European Regional Forum, including: promoting a sustainable post-pandemic recovery; advancing women's empowerment and reducing gender-based violence; advancing innovation and digitization; ensuring affordable food and nutrition for all; putting youth at the center of recovery; and promoting a circular economy.

The Executive Secretaries of the five UN Regional Commissions then presented their messages.

Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), proposed a recovery plan that safeguards vaccine access for all, and promotes greater liquidity and favorable financing conditions for countries in the region.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), said regional achievement of the SDGs can be realized through improved social protection programmes, sustainable digital connectivity policies, and climate mitigation and adaptation actions that are integrated into national COVID-19 recovery plans.

Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), noted Europe is on track to achieve only 23 of the SDG targets by 2030. For 80 targets, she added, they lack sufficient data to assess progress. She stressed the need to enhance connectivity using digital tools, and support a green and resilient recovery promoting a circular economy.

Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), highlighted the estimated USD 435 billion needed for emerging economies to catch up to developed economies and that Africa remains the only continent where export levels remain below pre-pandemic levels. She suggested a green economy could

help the region harness climate change to create jobs and re-launch economies.

Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, ESCWA, stated that social protection and economic policy measures are necessary to protect from future shocks and encouraged a debt funding mechanism that promote North-North, South-South and triangular cooperation.

In the interactive dialogue “Voices from the Regions,” Sergey Glazyev, Eurasian Economic Commission, said that SDGs are achievable when there is more regional cooperation and called for broadening the number of indicators that can be used to measure implementation.

Benedict Okey Oramah, African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank), highlighted the work of his institution in partnering with regional institutions such as ECA, and described the success of the Pandemic Trade Impact Mitigation Facility in helping African countries address the economic and health impacts of COVID-19.

Nadia Al Saeed, Al Etihad Bank, Jordan, shared policies that her institution implemented during the pandemic, such as: supporting work-from-home by providing internet connection and computers; no cuts to benefits; vaccinations for employees; and support for caretakers.

Christoph Steck, Telefonica S.A., Spain, discussed the importance of cooperation between the private and public sectors, especially in improving policies and regulations to reflect digitization and connectivity challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kofi Kankam, Elizka Relief Foundation, Ghana, called for strong global partnerships, inclusivity, improving data collection, accountability processes, mobilizing resources for renewable energy, financing mechanisms, and aligning objectives between civil society and governments.

Ms. Wardarina, Asia-Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism, illustrated regional civil society engagement mechanisms to harness grassroots movements as an example of how dialogue can lead to progressive policymaking in the SDG process.

In the discussion, LEBANON mentioned the unprecedented crisis her country faces due to refugees and COVID-19 and drew attention to the role of the Regional Commissions in supporting SDG implementation. IRAQ stressed the value of regions to achieving the SDGs and improving the quality of VNRs. MOROCCO emphasized the importance of regional and South-South cooperation. The WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS MAJOR GROUP called for strengthening the protection of migrants, young women, and people with disabilities, and fostering resilience by providing climate-friendly jobs, social protection, eliminating gender violence, and a new model for global governance with an inclusive multilateral system. The STAKEHOLDER GROUP ON AGEING emphasized that eight out of ten deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic have been elders, and called for improving the well-being of older persons.

Voluntary National Reviews

Panel 1: CHINA presented its second VNR, highlighting its new development philosophy—incorporating innovation, coordination, openness, and green for all—is linked with the 2030 Agenda. He noted: China was the only major economy registering positive growth during the pandemic; their COVID-19 response effectively treated all people, young and old; and they donated 290 billion masks, 4.9 billion testing kits, and over 500 million vaccine doses to over 100 countries. He emphasized: eliminating absolute poverty; creating 60 million new urban jobs in the last five years, a 77.4-year life expectancy, and giant pandas no longer being endangered. He described China’s contributions to global afforestation, land restoration, and use of renewable energy, dropping its carbon intensity 48.4% from 2005 levels. He added China is working to bridge the Belt and Road Initiative with the 2030 Agenda.

INDONESIA asked how China is tackling climate change. EGYPT asked for China to share experiences in poverty alleviation, since it met its goal ten years ahead of schedule. The ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM asked about plans for using gender disaggregated data, promoting women’s empowerment, addressing gender-based violence, and involving all stakeholders in SDG implementation.

In response, CHINA said poverty eradication is on top of the government’s agenda and is possible with strong leadership and a whole-of-society approach. He said China is helping other countries through South-South cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative. On climate change, he said carbon dioxide emissions per GDP dropped by 18.8% and the share of non-fossil energy increased by 15.9%. He added China is addressing problems with uneven development between the coast and inland and between rural and urban areas.

AFGHANISTAN presented its second VNR, noting its work to integrate the 2030 Agenda into a national peace and development framework. He outlined the: development of Afghanistan’s SDGs; establishment of an SDG Executive Committee and four Technical Committees; and creation of a national indicator framework using 28 government entities as custodians. On achievements, he described improvement on hunger; expansion of social protection to all citizens; investments in climate change resilience and renewable energy; and improvements in the provision of education. He emphasized the challenges of its national conflict, and noted the way forward requires peace building, state building, market building, and international financial assistance.

IRAQ asked if Afghanistan is prioritizing any goals in its second national peace and development framework. CHAD asked how Afghanistan will respond to development and poverty reduction imperatives, while ensuring the security of the population. The NGO MAJOR GROUP asked how SDG implementation progress can continue with the rising threats to peace and COVID-19, and what progress has been made in

collaborative actions to alleviate poverty and participation in the VNR process.

In response, AFGHANISTAN said it has a good chance of achieving SDG 13. To address security needs, the government is creating and implementing regional programmes, while helping to ensure women and children and other vulnerable groups are protected. He stressed the importance of job creation, women's rights, and stakeholder engagement.

DENMARK's second VNR highlighted initiatives on green investment, sustainable value chains, and labor rights, among others. He stressed that all new legislation will be screened for the SDGs. He highlighted how different stakeholder groups contributed chapters to the VNR and reported Denmark's challenges include responsible consumption and production and the need for a stronger focus on the most marginalized groups.

SWEDEN asked how the Danish parliament is engaged in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. SWITZERLAND asked about Denmark's approach to inequality, especially with immigrants, and how it is embedding the SDGs in the legislative process. The NETHERLANDS asked about strategies to ensure participation and support from different groups, including youth and the private sector. The NGO MAJOR GROUP asked how Denmark is reducing pressures on natural resources.

In response, DENMARK explained how members from all political parties, civil society, and the private sector are working on the SDGs on an ongoing basis, not just when preparing VNRs. He added involvement of youth and leaving no one behind are important to the Danish approach.

Panel 2: THAILAND presented its second VNR, noting that although the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities, the prospects of the 4th Industrial Revolution promises opportunities to change the way we do things in positive ways. Considering this, Thailand underlined its focus on the Bio-Circular-Green Economy model.

JAPAN asked about Thailand's COVID-19 response measures. BHUTAN inquired about the role of the sufficiency economy philosophy for SDGs in promoting their "homegrown approach." The WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP asked about long-term plans for promoting human rights of marginalized groups, including Indigenous Peoples and women.

Thailand responded by highlighting efforts in achieving universal healthcare, with the application of policies related to access to health information and implementation of sustainable agriculture, grassroots economy, partnership projects in 26 countries, and a Bio-Circular Green Economy model. He said that the establishment of the VNR was part of a whole-of-society approach, which included contributions from women and youth.

CHAD presented its second VNR and highlighted the strides that the country has made in reducing poverty, ensuring clean drinking water, increasing schooling, and a shrinking maternal mortality rate. He noted ongoing social challenges of female genital mutilation, and the forced marriage of underage girls.

COSTA RICA asked who ensured the implementation of SDG 16 in relation to post-pandemic recovery. NIGER asked about

plans for resource mobilization. AFGHANISTAN asked about prioritizing action to maximize impact. MADAGASCAR asked about support measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on SDG implementation. The WORKERS AND TRADE UNION MAJOR GROUP asked about plans to engage marginalized groups.

CHAD responded that despite the multiple crises, it is invested in guaranteeing peace, justice, stability, and SDG achievement, but lack resources. He stressed the importance of private investment and government efforts including providing basic social services for the most vulnerable people, as well as access to water and electricity, and fostering youth employment. He highlighted that security costs make up 35% of its national budget, precluding greater investment in social policies.

NORWAY presented its second VNR, stating innovation in areas such as artificial intelligence, big data and 5G are opportunities to emerge from the pandemic crisis. Norway emphasized that youth are at the heart of its strategy, and introduced the President of the Norwegian Youth Council, who drew attention to the role of youth in sustainable development decision making.

FINLAND asked about handling the negative spillover effects related to climate and environment. MALAYSIA asked about cooperation with local authorities. MADAGASCAR inquired about coordination with civil society in collecting and presenting data. The NGO MAJOR GROUP asked about disaggregated data on minorities and Indigenous Peoples.

NORWAY responded that civil society participated in the VNR process, but was not included in the peer review, which will be considered in the future. He mentioned an agreement with local authorities for subnational reviews and finding new ways to promote local implementation, working closely with the Sámi. He shared that an independent entity made a statistical annex to the VNR, which includes unedited contributions from civil society.

Panel 3: TUNISIA presented its second VNR, noting its participatory approach to the review process. He referenced the development of a multi-stakeholder national committee dedicated to the implementation of the SDGs and a draft development vision aligned with the 2030 Agenda. He drew attention to efforts to increase women's participation in policymaking, to end violence against women, and achieve greater gender equality. He also listed child protection as a top priority, and further discussed initiatives to establish social protections, free medical assistance, assistance for the disabled, skills training, and a national employment strategy.

FRANCE and QATAR asked Tunisia about how it planned to accelerate actions and achievement in the Decade of Action. The WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP asked what measures Tunisia will take to address gender inequalities, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TUNISIA responded that inclusive development is a top priority. He said COVID-19 is not just a problem but represents an opportunity that enabled Tunisia to rebuild its emergency medical

services, increase the number of intensive care beds from 200 to 1000, and provide free healthcare. He said COVID-19 is not delaying Tunisia's agenda but speeding it up.

The BAHAMAS presented its second VNR, recalling the dual challenge of managing recovery from a Category 5 hurricane and the COVID-19 pandemic. He emphasized youth unemployment, skills shortages, insufficient growth of key industries and infrastructural gaps worsened by these crises. On progress, he stated SDGs 3 (good health and well-being), 8 (decent work and economic growth), and 13 (climate action) are priority areas, and noted the establishment of a new ministry for disaster management and a successful ban on plastic utensils, straws, and containers using an import tax. On Bahamas' pandemic response, he discussed its vaccine rollout and government programmes on food distribution, unemployment benefits, small business investments, skills-building programmes, and efforts to develop a national programme on decent work.

The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC asked, given the impact of Hurricane Dorian and COVID-19, how has the Bahamas sustained and revitalized its economy. MEXICO inquired how the tourism and financial services sectors have responded to COVID-19 and climate change, in line with the 2030 Agenda. The NGO MAJOR GROUP asked what the Bahamas is doing to combat and mitigate the effects of climate change and protect biodiversity, as well as prioritize support to groups often left behind.

In response, the BAHAMAS said it has invested considerable sums to recovery efforts, including tax credits, employment retention, payroll support and VAT-free zones. On tourism, the Bahamas collaborated with the US Centers for Disease Control to enable American tourists to return without risking community spread. The financial services sector was not seriously impacted despite the downturn. He said climate change mitigation efforts involve renewable energy, coastal mitigation, and civil society partnerships.

Panel 4: The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC presented its second VNR, explaining the government has introduced an arsenal of public policy mechanisms targeting social protection, unemployment, cash flows to avoid a bank crisis and support to small and medium-sized enterprises. It acknowledged further targeted support is needed for education at all levels, digital connectivity, and the care economy.

MOROCCO asked about strengthening coordination at the sectoral and local levels. PHILIPPINES inquired about how the country will address the reversal in the growth rate and which elements of the productive sectors are expected to contribute. The STAKEHOLDER GROUP OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES asked how the Dominican Republic guarantees human rights for people who are discriminated against based on sexual orientation.

In response, the DOMINICAN REPUBLIC called local and territorial development the "crux" of their development policy and ensures that the public system coexists with local demands. He stated despite the fact that their projections for growth are already above 7% annually, their goal is not growth-oriented, but to ensure access to opportunities for all. On human rights, he recognized

that the most vulnerable have not benefited from a rights-based policy, since the government has not yet properly tackled that issue, but added it is looking to overcome this problem.

SIERRA LEONE presented its third VNR, describing its education programme, which provides free primary education, free school meals, and free textbooks to children. He said this has allowed the country to tackle a number of SDGs, including curbing hunger, promoting universal education and literacy, and helping alleviate costs for impoverished parents. He added that in a rapid impact assessment of the programme, 90% of respondents expressed satisfaction with it and it provides savings of USD 100 per pupil. Despite these strides, he acknowledged that other fundamental challenges remain related to infrastructure, clean water, energy, and science and technology, and that financing is the key.

LIBERIA asked about sustaining the free quality school education programme. The VOLUNTEERS STAKEHOLDER GROUP asked about improvements proposed to the justice system to address political divides and the right to ensure social cohesion.

SIERRA LEONE responded that education is not cheap, and the government currently allocates 22% of the budget to education, since it is an "accelerator" that will unlock other SDGs. He stated that while there are gaps and the need for better coordination with civil society organizations, Sierra Leone is doing its best to include all stakeholders in decision-making processes. He informed that the justice system has taken important steps, and judges are now deployed in 16 districts.

In the Cyber-Corridors

During Tuesday's opening of the High-level Ministerial Segment, among the Heads of State and other world leaders, youth delegates gave two powerful presentations, seamlessly inserting the voice of the future into a major global forum. The effect and the messages delivered were clear: youth are changemakers. In contrast to delegates worn and disengaged from vacuous pandemic-style, internet-based meetings that have significantly curbed (in-person) diplomacy as we know it, youth appear at ease in this medium and at this level. The passion and clarity of their interventions palpably invigorated the virtual "room." Throughout the HLPF, members of national youth delegations have reflected understanding of complex issues and interlinked processes, further emphasizing the readiness of this generation to assume a formal role in sustainable development decision making. "We are not just a target group," said one youth.

HLPF 2021 has illustrated divides that are tangible obstacles to achieving the SDGs: inequality, gender discrimination, the digital and technology divide, and geopolitical capacity for implementation. But maybe, some argue, it is finally time to start formally bridging the *generational* divide so as to address the gap between sustainable development champions and those who make decisions.

The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* summary and analysis of the 2021 HLPF will be available on Monday, 19 July 2021, at enb.iisd.org/sdgs/HLPF2021.