

HLPF 2023 Highlights: Wednesday, 12 July 2023

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7 on affordable and clean energy by 2030 is “an unprecedented challenge” but still possible with scaled-up ambition and the right policies. This was one of the main messages by delegates at the 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) on its third day. Delegates also discussed SDG 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure, looking at how innovation can be a “game changer” for many SDGs, and the far-reaching impact and roles of sustainable infrastructure and digital infrastructure and connectivity.

SDG 7 and Interlinkages with Other SDGs – Affordable and Clean Energy

Paula Narváez (Chile), Vice President, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), chaired this session. Leonardo Souza, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), presented highlights of the UN Secretary-General’s report on progress towards the SDGs, focusing on SDG 7.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), discussed regional priorities, such as building green power infrastructure in Africa; greater renewables deployment in Europe; more renewable-based power capacity in Latin America; funding for energy research in Western Asia; and more investment in a just energy transition in Asia and the Pacific.

Damilola Ogunbiyi, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sustainable Energy for All, and Co-Chair, UN Energy, noted lagging progress toward SDG 7, but said “we have the opportunity and obligation to reverse this trend.” She pointed out energy is linked to achieving two-thirds of the 169 SDG targets, underlying its crucial role in sustainable development. Ogunbiyi discussed Energy Compact achievements, including: USD 46 billion invested; enhanced electricity access for six million people; 88 gigawatts (GW) renewable energy capacity installed; and 2,450 GW hours saved through energy efficiency measures.

Simon Stiell, Executive Secretary, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), said what is needed is energy access that is reliable and sustainable for generations to come, which fossil fuels are not. He emphasized halving emission by 2030 is “an unprecedented challenge, but possible,” and will require correct enabling policies; clear and ambitious targets; scaled-up deployment; redirecting capital to renewables and energy conservation; and ending fossil fuel subsidies. He also urged reforming international public finance structures.

Sheila Oparaocha, Executive Director, Energia, moderated the panel. Guangzhe Chen, Vice President for Infrastructure, World Bank, mentioned declining public financing and highlighted the World Bank’s work in Sub-Saharan Africa, urging a shift from piecemeal approaches towards systemic, large-scale solutions.

Hans Olav Ibrekk, Special Envoy for Climate and Security, Norway, lamented low, insufficient, and misallocated global finance, calling for domestic resource mobilization, efforts on

education and training for green energy jobs, and more private investments in Africa and other under-resourced markets. He proposed establishing an intergovernmental panel on energy and prioritizing clean cooking on the agenda.

Yoko Lu, Women’s Major Group, stressed the adverse impact of extractive industries and called for an equitable energy transition with people-owned and democratically controlled infrastructure.

David Arinze, Diamond Development Initiatives, Nigeria, noted that youth, having passion and solutions for clean energy, should be empowered by deliberate action from governments.

In the ensuing discussion, many delegates reported on national and regional efforts towards the clean energy transition, with several focusing on:

- the need for democratization and diversification;
- the creation of new jobs in the green energy sector;
- the need for safeguards against greenwashing;
- the need to promote energy efficiency and manage energy demand; and
- the range of innovative technologies and solutions such as green hydrogen, heat pumps and residual heat use, set to accelerate the transition.

Some delegates stressed that decarbonization pathways will be context-specific, noting that one solution cannot fit all.

Noting the Goal’s interlinkages are also conducive to achieving both the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, one delegate stressed these are not competing targets. Others recalled the “access” aspect of this Goal, noting disproportionate electrification between rural and urban areas and households across income-levels. Some called for more investment and technology support to least developed countries (LDCs) to develop electricity generation, transfer and supply capacities.

Other points delegates raised included:

- the need to recognize and respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples in achieving a just energy transition;
- strengthening multilateral cooperation and scaled-up support that ensures adequate, predictable, sustainable and fit-for-purpose finance is imperative;
- mobilizing the full breadth of innovative financial instruments and leveraging private sector investments through regulatory reforms to achieve this at international and subnational levels;
- the health benefits of realizing SDG 7, such as powering health facilities, and reducing indoor air pollution, which can make more compelling arguments for accelerated work;
- the need to “call out false solutions,” with carbon capture, storage, and mitigation measures for fossil fuels highlighted as examples;
- investing in weather and climate services to ensure climate-resilient energy infrastructure; and
- the need to end wasteful subsidies to carbon-based energy.

Oparaocha said the message from interventions is clear: we must accelerate our efforts, as people and the planet cannot wait. She summarized key messages of the session as including:

- we need to immediately act on what is most necessary;
- clean and non-carbon energy must be a priority for all;

- Sub-Saharan Africa should be at the center of energy access efforts;
- we need to address clean cooking more; and
- we need to create a sustainable global intergovernmental dialogue on energy.

In final messages from the panel, Lu emphasized inclusion, improved financial flows, financial infrastructure reform, and avoiding false solutions. Ibrekk underscored the importance of country ownership and leadership and strengthened partnerships “that actually deliver.” Chen emphasized scaling up and replicating innovations in renewable energy and energy storage, seeking disruptive business models, finding ways to grow private financing, especially for powering schools and health facilities, and creating a dedicated fund for electrification.

SDG 9 and Interlinkages with Other SDGs – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

ECOSOC Vice Presidents Albert Ranganai Chimbindi (Zimbabwe) and Paula Narváez (Chile) chaired this session. Faryal Ahmed, UNDESA, presented the highlights of the UN Secretary-General’s report on progress towards the SDGs, focusing on SDG 9.

Jan Beagle, Director-General, International Development Law Organization, moderated. Norichika Kanie, Keio University, Japan, and Member, Independent Group of Scientists writing the Global Sustainable Development Report, said science, technology and innovation can play an important role in scaling up solutions and enabling needed transformations. He highlighted the role of information technology to connect people, spread ideas, and improve collaboration. Underscoring the role of innovation for all SDGs, Kanie stressed that innovation can be a game changer, “and we need game changers because we are behind in the achievement of SDGs.”

Melike Yetken Krilla, Google, discussed Google’s Digital Sprinter initiative and other efforts to bring high-speed internet to the under- and un-connected, explaining that without connecting women and excluded groups and bringing them into the modern economy, they cannot participate in the most important technological advances. She stressed inclusiveness is critical to economic growth and realizing the SDGs.

Axel Berger, German Institute of Development and Sustainability, highlighted, among other issues:

- fundamental structural challenges inhibiting SDG achievement in many developing countries;
- “industrial policy is here to stay,” but should be made green and sustainable;
- the development of technological and manufacturing capacities should be regarded as global public goods; and
- current international frameworks should be reformed to actually promote sustainable development.

Noting that Africa is the region with the youngest population and Uganda has the world’s second youngest population, Sabrina Atwine, CEO, Nimarungi, Uganda, said the challenge is empowering these potential agents for change by addressing access to education and helping young African entrepreneurs with access to internet, laptops, other tools, and capacity-building.

Nagesh Kumar, Director, Indian Institute for Studies in Industrial Development, said lessons from India’s industrial policies are that well-crafted and executed strategies do deliver, and well-formulated strategies can help achieve a green transition with positive spillovers for other SDGs.

In an interactive panel exchange, Kanie underscored the importance of having socially accountable science, while Berger cautioned to consider unintended effects and trade-offs in SDGs work, not just their synergies. Berger also called for developing laws and regulations in participatory ways so that those most affected, especially developing countries, have a say in how the instruments are developed.

Subsequent discussions gave delegates the opportunity to highlight their commitment to, and outline in-country and regional progress on SDG 9, emphasizing the realized and potential role of partnerships in effectively closing gaps to achieving this Goal. Speakers underlined the breadth of sectors that require integrated, optimized, and innovative infrastructure, from transport to broadband to food production. Many noted the central role of the private sector in driving innovative and resilient infrastructure development, with governments’ parallel role in creating enabling environments. Details of progress and focal areas included:

- bilateral and multilateral development projects;
- connectivity improvement for rural areas and in education;
- increased gender parity in education and research;
- improved livelihoods and decent, green jobs are created in manufacturing and infrastructure; and
- the need for public data infrastructure to increase transparency.

Speakers highlighted the need for innovative and blended financing to leverage green investments. Among examples were a USD 600 billion G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and the Blue Dot Network, which certifies projects thus helping to attract private finance. Others called for:

- investing in human capital and better consideration of the gender dimension and youth employment, as well as more emphasis on training for high-paid jobs and skill development in information; telecommunications and communications; manufacturing; and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM);
- linking international funding and partnerships to initiatives that foster inclusive and sustainable development;
- decoupling economic growth from environmental damage, and ensuring it is inclusive, noting the impacts of poorly designed infrastructures on the environment, human health, and pollution;
- increased support to open data, particularly in the research and academic sectors, to ensure just benefit-sharing, and leveraging technological tools, notably big data analytics, and investment in research and innovation; and
- integrating disaster risk reduction in infrastructural projects for greater resilience to natural disasters.

Highlighting takeaways from the discussions, panelists noted, *inter alia*:

- the role of “governance innovation” to realize transformations on both the supply and demand sides;
- the need to be aware of both risks and opportunities, including how a fast-changing global environment is impacting on competition and exacerbating exclusion;
- focusing partnerships on inclusive and green growth in LDCs; and
- creating conducive policies and regulatory frameworks to unlock the “integrity dividend.”

Concluding that “there’s hope for SDG 9,” Atwine underscored the need for focusing on practical training and mentoring for youth and on excluded communities at the local level.

In the Corridors

They have proclaimed themselves the leaders of today, “not tomorrow,” and youth have certainly been front and center at this HLPF, making some strong statements that shook an otherwise sleepy room. Among other hard truths, they called for confronting responsibility for the “gross injustices” of the colonial past. Despite such moments, there was a growing sense of fatigue and frustration this Wednesday with the monotonous nature of the meeting, as the so-called “interactive discussions” that follow panels haven’t lived up to their moniker – most are written speeches read aloud, rather than questions or points posed to panelists, or reactions or follow-up to other interventions. Making a concerted effort to whip up some enthusiasm with jokes and observations, the ECOSOC Vice President chairing the afternoon session also urged young people “to keep us honest.”