

## HLPF 2021 Highlights: Thursday, 8 July 2021

There have been over 186 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 4 million deaths globally to date, as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO). Less than a quarter of the world's population—and only 1% of people in low-income countries—have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. The impact of COVID-19 on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), once again, loomed large over the third day of the 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

The day opened with a review of implementation of SDGs 3 (good health and well-being), 10 (reduced inequalities), 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), and 17 (partnerships). Attention then shifted to the important role of cities and local authorities in SDG implementation. In the afternoon, the focus was on restoring progress in implementing the SDGs in African countries, least developed countries (LDCs), and landlocked developing countries (LLDCs).

### *SDGs in focus: How do we get on track for building more peaceful, equal, and inclusive societies?*

Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Vice President Collen Vixen Kelapile (Bostwana) described the growing social divide created by COVID-19, and called for more cohesion and analysis of the interlinkages between SDGs 3, 10, and 16.

Haoyi Chen, UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) presented elements of the Secretary-General's [report](#) on progress towards the SDGs. She noted that before the pandemic, many areas such as maternal health were improving, but the report shows that during COVID-19, 90% of households reported disruptions to health services. Chen also highlighted the upward trends for displaced people, child labor, and trafficking victims.

Jan Beagle, Director-General, International Development Law Organization (IDLO), moderated the session. She drew attention to the lack of progress to achieve the 2030 Agenda prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that COVID-19 response and the SDGs are essentially the same agenda.

Gabriela Bucher, Executive Director, Oxfam International, emphasized the “pharmaceutical monopoly” governing COVID-19

vaccines, urged for freedom from such controls, and universal healthcare.

Armida Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), called for universal healthcare and social protection to emerge from this pandemic, spurred by regional cooperation.

Quarraisha Abdool Karim, Columbia University, pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic sits in the context of multiple other unfinished pandemics, such as HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, and Ebola. She warned that Africa is lagging behind; while the world has enough doses for 20% of its population, Africa only has enough doses to vaccinate 2% of its population.

James Boyce, University of Massachusetts Amherst, shared lessons learned during COVID-19, including the differentiated responses between high- and low-income countries, and recommended strengthening countries' fiscal capacity and efforts to control offshore tax havens.

Sarah Cliffe, New York University Center on International Cooperation, presented key points involving vicious cycles created during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the fact that unequal societies have a higher percentage of infection rates and higher violence rates. She recommended partnerships between governments and civil society to address these challenges.

Marina Sereni, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy, shared lessons learned during the SDG 16 Conference held in Rome earlier this year, including: build resilient societies for shocks and crises; establish people-centered justice systems and effective institutions; strengthen anti-corruption measures; and bolster transparency and accountability mechanisms.

Najat Maalla M'jid, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, said children and youth were more vulnerable to violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in poorer and marginalized societies. She recommended a people-centered approach to tackle the SDGs, which needs to involve children and youth.

Nata Menabde, WHO, stressed that investment in health systems has long-term benefits and highlighted the value of universal health care and investment in health systems and workers.

Valentina Bodrug-Lungu, Associate Professor, Moldova State University, stated the attainment of the SDGs is an opportunity to make real change, and recommended promoting policy and

actions within a human rights framework to ensure universal social protection and tackle inequalities.

Amb. Mohamed Fathi Ahmed Edrees, Egypt, Chair of Peace Building Commission, presented results of peace-building measures in response to COVID-19, including sustained support in affected countries' transition efforts, encouraging inclusivity and transparency measures, and addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality to build back better.

Margit Kraker, Secretary-General, International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions, mentioned the benefits of using stable audit systems in times of crisis. She stressed the importance of institutional transparency and audit work is necessary to ensure citizens' trust in governments.

Jorge Bermudez, Comptroller General, Chile, called the COVID-19 pandemic a "sanitary and corruption crisis," noting that diversion of funds from healthcare is a key area of corruption. He supported: a culture of accountability in the public sector; improved understanding of the links between corruption and gender to improve equality and empowerment of women; and safeguarding the rule of law.

Francisco André, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Portugal, highlighted: the One Health approach, intrinsic connections between mental health and human rights, the view of migrants as key actors to sustainable development, and the gender dimension of quality.

Irma Pineda Santiago, Member, Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, urged for: full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in decision-making bodies; an end to discrimination and appropriation of Indigenous land; and addressing inequalities in education and healthcare services while using culturally appropriate indicators.

In the discussion, SWITZERLAND supported an approach based on human rights, and drew attention to the joint work of Switzerland and the UK to address and support cash flows from remittances. FRANCE emphasized its work on SDG 17 and the need for more international cooperation.

The EU noted its efforts to promote disease risk prevention within the G7 and G20, the European Commission's efforts to coordinate health sectors to mitigate impacts of COVID-19, and the EUR 20 billion global recovery package and EUR 3 billion support for COVAX. A Youth Delegate from the NETHERLANDS called for equal representation at the UN, the significant human-rights violations of the climate crisis, and highlighted the UN Security Council resolution on Youth, Peace and Security.

INDONESIA stressed its commitment to transparency and accountability, free vaccinations, and reforming systems for social protection, national health, disaster resilience, and tourism. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION noted the importance of strengthening of national health systems and highlighted partnerships, such as Russia's development of four COVID-19 vaccines, noting the first, Sputnik V, is being used by 1.5 billion people in 60 countries.

The NGO MAJOR GROUP called for a One Health approach, ensuring human rights abuses are punished and everyone has access to justice, recognizing the pivotal role of civil society in

promoting a peaceful and inclusive world. A Youth Delegate from BELGIUM highlighted the connection between the climate crisis and human rights. She reported from Wednesday's side event on "Climate change and human rights: Youth-led initiative to request an International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion."

The CIVIL SOCIETY GROUP FOR FINANCING FOR DEVELOPMENT said exacerbating inequalities is leading to hundreds of billions of dollars of illicit financial flows, and flagged the issue of international tax dodging by the wealthiest corporations and individuals. They called on the UN General Assembly to negotiate an international tax treaty. NORWAY called for international governance on trade, investment, taxes, and financial flows to underpin efforts to achieve more equal societies and ensure the rights of minorities in vulnerable situations.

The TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND PARTICIPATION (TAP) NETWORK, representing 180 civil society organizations who endorsed the Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG 16+, said the declaration is a renewed and urgent call for strengthening commitments and actions for SDG 16. A Youth Delegate from FINLAND called for mainstreaming gender equality across all goals, universal health coverage, including sexual and reproductive health services and mental health services, and ensuring the protection of people with disabilities, civil society, and youth.

The ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE (OSCE) said to respond to the challenges exacerbated by COVID-19, we need: conflict prevention and trust building; reduction in inequalities, especially for women and girls; and multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches and partnerships. NEPAL described progress in implementing SDG 3, including on child mortality and mental health, as well as measures to increase the number of women in parliament and local governments.

A Youth Delegate from SWEDEN noted the universality of 2030 Agenda and the Youth4Peace Agenda, adding partnerships are essential for the creation of safe spaces. The REPUBLIC OF KOREA said they have been leading discussions with Bangladesh on inequality with the Group of Friends of SDG 10, focusing on equitable distribution of vaccines, policies to address inequalities, and the expansion of development cooperation.

The UN ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (UNEP) called for urgent adoption of integrated nature and health policies, supporting the One Health approach. He called for a new paradigm of resource use that is equitable, resilient, and healthy, as well as the promotion environmental rule of law and human rights. The STAKEHOLDER GROUP OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES called for decision making that enables the active participation of persons with disabilities in all areas of the COVID-19 response, as well as access to justice, especially for disabled women and girls, and those facing gender-based violence.

AIDS FOUNDATION (Denmark) reminded participants that there is still no vaccine for HIV/AIDS and that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted health services for HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria in low-income countries.

***Going local: How can we support local authorities in implementing the SDGs and how can we best build on voluntary local reviews?***

ECOSOC Vice President Sergiy Kyslytsya (Ukraine) chaired the session, noting Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have proven useful for SDG implementation.

Moderator Tony Pipa, Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development, Brookings Institution, highlighted the value of VLRs in translating concrete community actions and solutions, and asked participants how multi-level governance can be strengthened.

Noraini Roslan, Mayor, Subang Jaya, Malaysia, shared their first VLR experience, stating that their approach was to empower communities to embrace the SDGs. She mentioned that despite national planning tools, Malaysia has not yet seen behavioral changes at the ground level.

Jan Vapaavuori, Mayor, Helsinki, Finland, stressed that VLRs are useful because they are done by local communities on their own terms. He said their VLR strategy was a powerful tool in recovering from COVID-19.

Nikolai Astrup, Minister of Local Government and Modernisation, Norway, and Bjorn Arild Gram, President of the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, in a video message, discussed Norway's case studies on multi-level governance. They said this review provided evidence that many SDG targets can only be achieved through extensive local action.

Cllr. Thembisile Nkadimeng, President, South African Local Government Association (SALGA), on behalf of the Local Authorities Major Group, stressed that the SDGs can only be achieved if local authorities take the lead, since one-third of the targets must be achieved at the local level.

Arantxa Tapia, President, Regions4, said the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates recovery must be rooted in resilience and equality, incorporate the work of regional governments, and strengthen multi-level governance.

Penny Abeywardena, New York City Commissioner for International Affairs, underlined the importance of VLRs to enable direct engagement between cities and the UN. She emphasized that urban residents are on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic and that local governments are the most informed to contribute to policies to address it. She announced that the VLR Declaration now has 215 global signatories.

Kenji Kitahashi, Mayor, Kitakyushu City, Japan, discussed the importance of VLRs in helping his city reflect on efforts and challenges, and develop environmental, social, and corporate governance criteria.

In the discussion, the CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES, Council of Europe, emphasized that localizing the SDGs is key to their achievement, and that towns need to be empowered. He underscored the need for local level reporting and amplifying and highlighting local and regional actions at the international level. FRANCE said it was vital to support local governments and actors to allow more dynamic work and consistency at multiple levels.

The City Engineer of Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel, stated that global issues are often felt most deeply at the local level, reinforcing

the vital role of local authorities in rapid response to threats, and called for strengthening public participation. THAILAND discussed the importance of data to support and unlock the potential of local communities to promote integrated and evidence-based plans and indicators.

The MAJOR GROUP FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH stated VLRs are an excellent way to implement the 2030 Agenda, but lamented the lack of comprehensive uptake in smaller municipalities that may not be aware of international agreements. She called for a global VLR repository. The EU said local and subnational authorities are essential to adopting locally applicable implementation measures and described the EU handbook to support local authorities on indicators and monitoring.

The ASSOCIATION OF FLEMISH CITIES AND MUNICIPALITIES, Belgium, explained the need for decentralized cooperation, more local government representation in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), uptake of SDGs in local governments, and support at the local level. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION commented on its programme to engage local and regional presentations on the SDGs at the national level.

The REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM, UN Economic Commission for Europe, expressed concern that local governments are not aware of the 2030 Agenda and stressed the need for national officials to promote local ownership, such as through workshops. INDIA emphasized VLRs are opportunities for local SDG implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and dissolving of local silos. INDONESIA reported that it has formalized localization of the SDGs, and stressed the need for data.

***Restoring the conditions for SDG progress in African countries, Least Developed Countries and Landlocked Developing Countries***

ECOSOC Vice President Pascale Baeriswyl (Switzerland) opened the session, noting that COVID-19 cases are on the rise in Africa, LDCs, and LLDCs, and these countries need debt relief and to bridge the digital divide.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, UNESCAP, on behalf of the five UN regional commissions, said COVID-19 calls for: scaling up recovery programmes to put people and planet first; boosting export diversification and harnessing new and emerging technologies; and the international community to complement national COVID-19 recovery efforts.

Moderator Courtenay Rattray, UN High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLS), called for faster access to vaccines, restoring living conditions, and getting back on track to achieve the SDGs. In a snap poll on what requires priority support to ensure a sustainable and resilient recovery in Africa, LDCs and LLDCs, 42% of the 67 respondents said effective public health responses.

Ali Al-Dabbagh, Qatar Fund for Development, called for focus on promoting a sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery; strengthening health and emergency systems; and restoring funding for SDG implementation—not just more finance, but for better and effective finance.

Sheila Oparaocha, Executive Director, ENERGIA International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy, said lack of energy access in LDCs and LLDCs impacts progress on the other SDGs. She highlighted how women are disproportionately affected by longstanding inequalities; how lack of energy has impeded COVID-19 responses; and the need for targeted training and education for women and youth to benefit from clean energy jobs and a just energy transition.

Pa Ousman Jarju, Green Climate Fund (GCF), highlighted estimates that USD 140-300 billion is needed annually until 2030 to combat climate change and meet the Paris Agreement goals. He noted that supporting countries with balanced funding and stimulus packages to support adaptation and mitigation efforts is crucial.

Chiagozie Udeh, Global Focal Point SDG7 Youth Constituency (Nigeria), described the challenges that Nigerian people—youth in particular—face as a result of limited electricity. He asked the UN to help with negotiating debt relief and mobilizing funding that is needed by vulnerable groups.

Basiru Isa, Network of Indigenous and Local Communities for the Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa, for the Indigenous Peoples Major Group, acknowledged that Africa is not on track to meet the 2030 Agenda or Africa's Agenda 2063. He said that land grabbing should not be pursued in the name of COVID-19 recovery and called for protection of Indigenous Peoples in Africa who preserve and protect the continent's biodiversity.

Mukhtar Tleuberdi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kazakhstan, Chair of LLDC Group, noted that the World Trade Organization (WTO) and others have found that economies of LLDCs declined by 8% in 2020 and this will continue without stimulus plans and a shift to a more knowledge-intensive and industrialized economy. He called for implementation of the Roadmap for Accelerated Implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for LLDCs.

Eisenhower Mkaka, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malawi, Chair of the LDC Group, reflected on the systemic issues that LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS face in recovering from COVID-19. He called for a focus on ending extreme poverty while promoting green, resilient, and inclusive development, and more comprehensive debt relief architecture.

Tandi Dorji, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bhutan, shared lessons learned from his country and said efforts need to double in order to build back better by strengthening global partnerships, especially with LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

Margaret Kobia, Cabinet Secretary for Public Service and Gender Affairs, Kenya, mentioned the importance of governing systems, including transparency and accountability as key to build back while taking into account the challenges of vulnerable groups. She recommended partnering with multinational organizations to manufacture personal protective equipment and vaccines to produce jobs.

Michael Lodge, Secretary-General, International Seabed Authority, described how the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea can assist LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS, by promoting effective participation in deep sea exploration, with equitable distributed benefits. As an example, he mentioned the Women in Deep-Sea Research project, which encourages women's empowerment and leadership in marine scientific research.

In the discussion, SOUTH AFRICA reflected on the importance of South-South and triangular cooperation. PORTUGAL described their development aid projects with African countries, noting that the EU is the largest trade and development partner of LDCs. FRANCE also shared information on their development aid in Africa, noting that they have invested EUR 2.6 billion in LDCs.

MOROCCO highlighted the challenges of countries with non-diversified economies, weak health systems, and inadequate digital resources, stressing the need for South-South cooperation. INDONESIA emphasized the need for coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, including philanthropies, the private sector, and international financial institutions.

The STAKEHOLDER GROUP OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES stressed social protections and human rights as a COVID-19 response. MADAGASCAR underscored the need for equitable vaccines as global public goods as well as debt relief, access to mixed financing and preferential markets, social protection systems, and decent work.

NEPAL highlighted universal and equitable vaccine access and fulfillment of ODA commitments, calling for extension of the G20 debt suspension. The EU emphasized vaccine access and debt relief centered on resilience, noting the importance of green bonds to mobilize private investors.

The WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP urged vaccine access as a global public good and reformation of measures and systems that disproportionately affect women. CHINA said government partners should honor their ODA commitments and reduce debt. He noted China's USD 3 billion in recovery aid over the next three years, and promoted building a global community of health for all.

The ASIA PACIFIC CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM described the 3.4 million newly hungry people in Myanmar, urging renewed financial investments and support. COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED BY WORK AND DESCENT underlined the potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships and investing in resilient infrastructure.

### *In the Cyber-Corridors*

Thursday offered participants the opportunity to reflect on SDG 3 on health and well-being, a goal significantly complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many voiced the urgency for reform and uptake of social protection systems and the need for universal health coverage in response to COVID-19. Throughout HLPF 2021, participants have generally expressed discontent with the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, which mirrors existing inequalities. "Pharmaceutical poverty," and "vaccine equity" summarize a common sentiment, according to one speaker, towards the "artificial restrictions of pharmaceutical monopolies" limiting vaccine distribution.

Unequal societies lead to more COVID-19 infections, which in turn, exacerbate inequalities and jeopardize resolution to the pandemic. Despite recognizing this vicious cycle, interventions exposed glaring oversight at HLPF 2021. The main COVID-19 response measures still focus on acute triage rather than the broader interlinked ambitions expressed by many to address disease risk reduction. Health targets that underpin the pandemic crisis and relate to vulnerability—such as maternal well-being, early childhood mortality, non-communicable diseases, and pollution—received little attention during the discussion.