

HLPF 2021 Highlights: Friday, 9 July 2021

The challenges of a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic were explored Friday as the first week of the 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) concluded. The first panel, which was in the format of a fireside chat, addressed the need for a multidimensional vulnerability index (MVI) for small island developing states (SIDS). The second panel focused on ensuring that science and technology support the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and bridge the digital divide. The final session explored the priorities of Major Groups and other Stakeholders on how to advance an inclusive pathway to recovery that does not leave anyone behind.

Coming together to help small island developing states to get on a path to realize the SDGs

Mafalda Duarte, CEO, Climate Investment Funds (CIF), said the middle-income status of many SIDS does not adequately reflect their true situation. In terms of the pandemic, SIDS bear the brunt of a 70% decline in international travel, and report a 7% decline in gross domestic product (GDP). She emphasized the value of a blue and diversified economy, domestic renewable energy markets, creation of an MVI, and noted CIF's USD 380 million portfolio of 36 climate change mitigation projects in SIDS.

Chet Greene, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Immigration and International Trade, Antigua and Barbuda, moderated the session. He lamented existing ineffective global policies and coordination and spoke to the need for tailored relief and policy responses and the importance of an MVI.

Wavel Ramkalawan, President of Seychelles, discussed an MVI, saying that SIDS should not be called high- or middle-income, especially when their economies have been devastated by COVID-19, and stressed the need for concessional financing, and for partnerships to result in action.

Mereseini Vuniwaqa, Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, Fiji, said Fiji is ravaged by COVID-19 and at the same time was hit by two Category 5 cyclones. Supporting an MVI, she called for attention to vulnerabilities of core groups, especially women and girls.

Simon Stiell, Minister for Climate Resilience and the Environment, Grenada, said concessional climate finance for resilience building must come from new and additional sources,

and developed countries must honor their commitments of 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) for official development assistance (ODA) and USD 100 billion for climate finance.

Ashni K. Singh, Senior Minister, Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance, Guyana, said access to concessional financing will make a significant difference in SIDS. He called for: recognition of the multidimensional vulnerability faced by SIDS; eradication of poverty; and to get beyond the middle income "illusion of prosperity."

Patricia Scotland, Secretary-General, Commonwealth of Nations, said empirical data shows small islands' multiple vulnerabilities and that judging vulnerability and resilience on GDP is flawed: "When a hurricane or cyclone comes it doesn't ask what your GDP is." She supported an MVI.

In the second round, President Ramkalawan said with an MVI the global community will have a common starting point for identifying when and where assistance is most required. Singh added that COVID-19 has reminded us of the interconnectedness of our world, and we need a recommitment to multilateralism. He called for: accelerated climate action; harnessing the benefits of the blue economy; and delivery on long-standing financial commitments.

Vuniwaqa said that Fiji's President has urged the G7 and G20 to go much further with grants and concessional finance to address the growing cost of healthcare and social protection for those who have lost their livelihoods. Stiell stated that never before have the extreme vulnerabilities that SIDS face been so amplified. He said what is needed now is definitive action. Scotland pointed out that prior to the pandemic crisis, SIDS displayed a high level of fiscal competence thanks to domestic efforts and the International Monetary Fund programmes, but today, they are punished for this fiscal competence due to categorization as middle-income and do not receive appropriate levels of international support needed to combat various challenges.

In response, Courtenay Rattray, UN High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, urged for additional liquidity to low-income and middle-income countries to attend to short-term balance and needs. He suggested a voluntary reallocation of liquidity by countries that do not need it to countries that do need it.

Emeline Siale Ilolahia, Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, Fiji, described the challenge of

valuing important resources such as local populations' relationship with the environment and oceans, Indigenous resources, and cultural identities in SIDS. She called for a balance between vulnerabilities and resilience in SIDS' economic modeling.

In the discussion, the Mayor of the French island, La Montagne, speaking on behalf of FRANCE, encouraged SIDS to learn and share from each other's common experiences in relation to health, risk management, sanitation, artistic and cultural education, and biodiversity. She mentioned workshops for raising awareness in schools and renewed cooperation agreements with island partners.

The NETHERLANDS explained that the challenges his country, as a coastal nation, faces with regards to climate change compared to SIDS is an example of the diverse impacts of climate change. He also pointed out the importance of considering the intersectionality between human rights and climate change. The BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY MAJOR GROUP highlighted the toll COVID-19 is having on tourism, a major source of income for SIDS, and called for the inclusion of small and medium-sized companies in multilateral negotiations. INDONESIA mentioned that pandemic recovery efforts are on a dangerous trajectory, fueled by the unequal distribution of resources, noting equitable and affordable access to vaccines is key for global recovery.

DENMARK discussed unequal allocation of climate finance, noting that, despite being extremely vulnerable, SIDS only receive 2.5% of climate finance. She mentioned opportunities, such as the SIDS Lighthouses initiative under the International Renewable Energy Agency and the SIDS Global Business Network, to support SIDS recovery.

The COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED BASED ON WORK AND DESCENT reflected on colonialism, exploitation, unequal distribution of natural resources, and justice for multi-ethnic populations. The WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP called for historical polluters to step up and assume their fair share of responsibility to support achievement of transformative and systemic changes. She stressed that women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate change, and therefore gender justice must be embedded in all climate policies.

The panelists offered brief responses, with Singh highlighting the commitments made in support of SIDS, especially relating to intergenerational responsibility. Ramkalawan hoped that the commitments expressed will be converted into reality, saying that we have wasted over 30 years with commitments. He also stressed how SIDS support the world, such as managing the world's largest seagrass bed. Stiell said that there is consensus as to the unique challenges SIDS face and hopes this translates into real action. Moderator Greene concluded by highlighting the value of creating an MVI.

Mobilizing science, technology and innovation and strengthening the science-policy-society interface

Mohammad Koba, Co-Chair of the 2021 Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Forum (Indonesia), presented key takeaways from the sixth annual STI Forum held in May 2021. He called for the urgent need to connect the entire world to the internet and unlock untapped innovation potential. He also promoted the free

flow of scientific and technological knowledge, data, and ideas across borders.

Houlin Zhao, Secretary-General, International Telecommunication Union (ITU), described how new technologies can transform people's lives, but pointed out that half of the world's population remains disconnected from digital technologies at an estimated cost of USD 450 billion, which remains unmet due to lack of funding. Zhao summarized need of the "4 I's" – infrastructure, investment, inclusiveness and innovation" to close the digital divide.

Andrejs Pildegovičs, Co-Chair of the 2021 STI Forum (Latvia), moderated the session.

Cherry Murray, Co-Chair, UN Secretary-General's 10 Member Group to Support the Technology Facilitation Mechanism, University of Arizona, discussed the focal areas of the 10 Member Group: 1) data as "the glue" for measurement of SDGs and interactions between targets, and eliminating the digital divide; 2) global innovation ecosystems that support education, research, and entrepreneurship; and 3) creating greener and more circular pathways for least developed countries to "leap frog" historically pollutive models of development.

Imme Scholz, Co-Chair, International Group of Scientists of the 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) (Germany) spoke about strengthening the science-policy-society interface. She emphasized the need to anchor developments in local actions and said digitization is the public responsibility of all countries and is an investment in the global common good. She stressed including perspectives of marginalized groups, such as traditional and Indigenous knowledge.

Nnenna Nwakanma, Chief Web Advocate, World Wide Web Foundation (Nigeria), discussed using digital resources as development tools while ensuring they are safe and secure. She defined elements of "meaningful connectivity" as daily connectivity, appropriate devices, and sufficient data and speed. She underlined her Foundation's message to Tik Tok, Twitter, Facebook, and Google to work to ensure the safety of women online.

Sanja Nikolin, UN Women Civil Society Advisory Group for Europe and Central Asia, gave an overview on gender equality, commenting on how current policies: widen the digital gender gap; give women few intellectual property rights; led the pandemic to reinforce daily digital exclusion that women face and cut off women's access to science; and create "impenetrable" sociopolitical structures that paralyze women's knowledge. She called for channeling resources to support women's participation in STI.

Elenita Dano, Asia Director of ETC Group (Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration), Philippines (Science & Technology Major Group), noted the challenge to equitably address STI, but highlighted opportunities to promote knowledge sharing, reduce carbon footprints, collect integrative data, and support an interdisciplinary approach to STI.

Karen Abudinen, Minister of Information and Communication Technologies, Colombia described her country's initiatives for digital transformation with the goal of connecting 70% of the

country by providing free internet, digital zones, and training computer programmers, and through a digital sales programme.

Ariunzaya Ayush, Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Mongolia, said COVID-19 has become an unexpected driver of digital transformation, and the E-Mongolia programme is enabling citizens to receive government services digitally. Half of all social services are already digitalized.

Andrii Vitrenko, Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Ukraine, described its participation in the Global Pilot Programme on STI for the SDGs roadmaps, and said digitization of public services is underway as well as opportunities for distance learning for children.

Ahmed Elmagarmid, Executive Director, Qatar Computing Research Institute, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar, said artificial intelligence (AI) and technology alone cannot achieve the SDGs. He called for multi-stakeholder partnerships, and described examples of projects, including mapping the gender digital divide.

Ismahane Elouafi, UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said STI accelerates the transition to sustainable agriculture and food systems. She highlighted outcomes from the UN Food System Summit 2021 Science Days, that took place this week.

In the discussion, FINLAND said COVID-19 has underlined the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships and stressed the importance of academic freedom, open science, and closing the digital gender gap. NIGERIA said leveraging technology promotes an inclusive economy and resilience across sectors.

BELGIUM called for incentivizing the innovation chain beginning with research and stressed the need for cross-sectoral cooperation, focusing on synergies between SDGs and strengthening multilateralism. NORWAY stressed increasing knowledge of actions between the SDGs and feedback cycles, noting the need to bridge the digital divide and shift to a sustainable AI ecosystem, including open data and green data centers with reduced carbon footprints.

IRAN stressed the importance of capacity building and said that new and emerging technologies should not be politicized, and called for the elimination of illegal coercive measures and sanctions.

The INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S MAJOR GROUP highlighted the value of complementing Indigenous knowledge with western science and technology, especially in sustainable land use management. The EUROPEAN COMMISSION stressed that interconnected phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the environmental crisis, should be tackled in an integrated manner. The REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM FOR EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA highlighted the value of engaging civil society in STI and of multidimensional development issues.

SWEDEN called for evidence-based action, and for researchers to engage with policymakers to narrow crucial knowledge gaps. POLAND shared their policy promoting young innovators, stating that it led to the creation of hundreds of start-ups in the last five years. FRANCE highlighted the role of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network in mobilizing expertise in support of public decision-makers.

CHINA stressed that effective use of multilateral resources is key in responding to the current challenges, since no country can do it on their own. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION shared their policy promoting foreign investments in clean technologies. The NGO MAJOR GROUP highlighted the need to invest in innovative food systems.

In closing remarks, Ismahane Elouafi stressed bringing the voices of traditional knowledge bearers into main decision-making, and recognized past mistakes in policymaking, such as copying policies without taking context into account.

The Moderator closed the session, observing risks and opportunities in the use of STI; taking into account diverse sources of knowledge; including a multi-stakeholder approach; and that implementation should be the main focus in policymaking.

Vision and priorities of civil society, the private sector and other Major Groups and Stakeholders: Realizing the SDGs during the COVID-19 recovery

Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said that Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) are critical actors in implementation of the SDGs by holding governments accountable and ensuring no one is left behind. He reported on a study of multi-stakeholder partnerships, noting drivers of success include: forward planning; trust; shared vision among partners; flexibility and responsiveness to change; commitment to achieving goals; clear governance structure; and effective leadership.

Moderator Mabel Bianco, Co-Chair, HLPF MGoS Coordination Mechanism and Women's Major Group, expressed concern that there is a loss of ambition. She raised alarm that many countries are using the pandemic as an excuse to increase authoritarianism and human rights abuses. She highlighted gender equality and women's rights as huge challenges deepened by the impact of the pandemic.

Ruth Warick, Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities, said the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities makes their rights explicit and stressed the importance of consulting and involving persons with disabilities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Kiran Rabheru, Stakeholder Group on Ageing, recommended: ensuring a human rights perspective in the implementation of SDGs and incorporating the voices of older people; a positive portrayal of older people; establishing procedures and appropriate space for civil society; collecting and utilizing relevant data for the SDGs; and drafting a UN convention to protect the rights of older people.

Mariah Rafaella Silva, LGBTI Stakeholder Group, said COVID-19 has widened inequalities, particularly for people who are vulnerable and face discrimination based on race, gender, and homophobia, and called for laws and policies to enable access to education, healthcare, and employment for all without barriers.

Joan Carling, Indigenous Peoples Major Group, emphasized how the pandemic exacerbated inequalities and called for a systemic transformation of the neoliberal economic system, including combating illicit financial flows, tax evasion, and money

laundering; as well as debt cancellation; guaranteed welfare for farmers, workers, women, and small business entrepreneurs.

Responding to the panelists, Sami Pirkkala, Secretary General, National Commission on Sustainable Development, Finland, presented the example of Finland's National Commission in promoting meaningful participation of civil society and other stakeholders in public matters. He said that in order for this participation to work, there needs to be an open and tolerant society that incentivizes mutual trust between government officials and stakeholders, leading to better policies and wider ownership.

Volker Türk, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination, called attention to the fact that the first of the commitments of the Declaration on the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the UN is to leave no one behind, which includes taking care of the aspirations and rights of minorities, Indigenous Peoples, and other vulnerable groups.

Nadine Gasman, President, National Women's Institute, Mexico, shared Mexico's key commitments to advance women's rights.

Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Chair, UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration, discussed measures for better participation in public institutions, such as: structural and procedural improvements in the design of consultative processes; including principles of participation, subsidiarity, and intergenerational equity; monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; and investing in lobby registries, conflict of interest policies, and other transparency processes.

In the discussion, GLOBAL COMPACT FRANCE said COVID-19 is a complex issue for business but that the most resilient businesses had strategies in line with the SDGs. The NORWEGIAN CONFEDERATION FOR TRADE UNIONS supported a whole-of-society approach and noted the value of civil society in Norway's second Voluntary National Review (VNR).

The MAJOR GROUP OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH supported action-oriented engagement with youth, who are capable of proposing solutions. A Youth Delegate from SWEDEN said meaningful inclusion needs to be translated into policies at all scales.

The BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY MAJOR GROUP said a focus of business is the science-policy-business-society interface, and inclusive multilateralism is necessary to tackle healthcare issues and recovery measures and engagement of all of society is indispensable. SENEGAL emphasized the plurality of stakeholders and diversity of actions for economic and social resilience and achievement of the 2030 Agenda, noting the ongoing challenge of communication between the private sector and civil society.

VOLUNTEER GROUPS ALLIANCE noted the importance of NGO participation and ensuring an accountability and transparency framework that requires consultation at all levels, including from the most marginalized and the volunteers who work with them. CACIF, Guatemala, described Guatemala's efforts to address the SDGs, the private sector's commitment to the 2030 Agenda, and need for public-private partnerships.

The NGO MAJOR GROUP suggested: formal inclusion of independent parallel reports on rights and inputs of civil society into the VNRs; bridging the digital divide; and ensuring regular review of SDG 16 is linked with human rights review processes. JAPAN drew attention to its work on healthy ageing and engagement of civil society, promoting a whole-of-society approach.

AUSTRIA supported inclusion of all stakeholders and enabling their meaningful participation. The CIVIL SOCIETY MECHANISM noted with concern the growing suppression of civil society voices and spaces and called for the vulnerable to be included in decision-making and planning.

TOGETHER 2030 said that historic civil liberties restrictions have been amplified as a result of the pandemic, but COVID-19 cannot be used as an excuse to violate human rights.

The MAJOR GROUP OF STAKEHOLDERS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS highlighted the growing inequalities as a result of the pandemic. She proposed the design and implementation of gender-specific stimulus packages, vaccines for all, and women-led business as examples of how gender equality can be achieved.

The COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED BASED ON WORK AND DESCENT said despite 36 countries having populations who are part of marginalized groups, no country has recognized these groups and what can be done to improve their lives, so they are not left behind.

In concluding comments, Warick emphasized meaningful participation. Rabheru advocated for inclusion based on intergenerational and scalable interventions within a national and cultural context. Carling called for addressing intellectual property agreements on medical licenses and products to facilitate universal access to medicines and vaccines to end the pandemic, and supported a global tax forum to curb illicit financial flows.

ECOSOC Vice President Juan Sandoval Mendiola (Mexico), ended the session and the first week of the HLPF noting the call for a new social contract is growing stronger by the day.

In the Cyber-Corridors

The end of the first week of the HLPF was populated with diverse but not divergent topics. While the first-hand testimonials from SIDS describing the impact of climate change and COVID-19 evoked emotion and reiterated the years-long call for a multidimensional vulnerability index, the discussion of the innovation continuum and all that it could offer for the 2030 Agenda evoked a creative spark. In a traditional world and bygone era, few put SIDS and STI together, but in a world where the impacts of climate change are felt more acutely than ever, the idea that climate modeling enabled by artificial intelligence and machine learning can save countless lives in SIDS reminded many that in today's world, every stakeholder and every sector can and should contribute to solutions to global challenges.

The message was clear on Friday as it has been throughout the week: in every session, from every perspective, the alarm of growing inequality was sounded, but, as a number of speakers asserted, this challenge can be turned into an opportunity to stop the endless discussions and mandate action that is inclusive and pays attention to the diverse voices coming to the table.