

## HLPF 2021 Highlights: Tuesday, 13 July 2021

“While the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) is intended to assess progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we must face facts. Rather than progress we are moving away from our goals.” UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted this stark reality in his opening address to the Ministerial Segment of the HLPF on Tuesday morning.

This joint meeting of the High-level Segment of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the three-day HLPF Ministerial Segment was held in a hybrid in-person/virtual format at UN Headquarters in New York. Following this session, the HLPF resumed hearing presentations of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Eight countries—Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba, Bolivia, San Marino, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Marshall Islands, and Nicaragua—presented their first VNRs.

### ***Opening of the High-level Segment of ECOSOC/ Ministerial Segment of HLPF***

ECOSOC President Munir Akram (Pakistan) opened the segment, noting this session is an opportunity to demonstrate international solidarity and cooperation and lay the foundation for a global recovery that builds back better. He called for universal vaccination, a universal programme of social protection for the poorest and most vulnerable, stating “no one will be safe until everyone is safe.”

UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and the SDGs. He called for decisive action in four areas:

- universal access to COVID-19 vaccines, testing and support;
- urgent ambitious climate action, including commitments to net-zero emissions by mid-century, accelerating transition from fossil fuels, and adequate finance;
- investing in more equal and inclusive societies, including gender equality, the care economy, jobs, and training for young people, and improved labor conditions and rights in the informal sector; and
- financing for development, including a more equitable debt architecture.

In a video message, UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said “we need to look at a future that is not constrained by systems and procedures that may no longer be relevant in today’s world,” noting the pandemic is both a tragedy and opportunity. He called for: reforming the global financing architecture; rapidly expanding digitization, noting the digital divide is becoming “the new face of inequality”; reducing the gender equality gap; and promoting a green recovery that reconciles humanity’s relationship with the natural world.

In a video message, Imran Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan, discussed the triple challenge the world is facing. He noted inequalities within and among nations, and shared four priorities for achieving the SDGs and pandemic recovery: universal and affordable access to vaccines, including waiver of intellectual property rights; adequate finance for sustainable development projects; national and international development strategies that target social protection, sustainable agriculture, digitization, and sustainable infrastructure; and addressing structural and systemic deficiencies of the international financial and trade architecture.

In a video message, Joko Widodo, President of Indonesia, called for: a quick recovery through fair and equitable vaccine access, stressing the need for action, asserting “vaccines as a global public good cannot remain a slogan”; a focus on assistance to vulnerable groups; strengthened support to developing countries for a resilient and just recovery; and strengthened global partnerships and trust.

Marta Lucía Ramírez Blanco, Vice President of Colombia, in a video message, called for reiterating commitments set out by the SDGs, and highlighted Colombia’s experience with the impacts of the crisis, particularly with regard to poverty eradication, inequality, and unemployment, and work on innovative green and sustainable large-scale solutions, including: solidarity programmes for poor and vulnerable households; preserving women’s employment networks; and establishing a record-breaking budget for education, including free university education. She drew attention to the Leticia Pact, a new environmental charter of the Andean Community and Colombia’s revised climate commitments.

Noting his country is ranked in the top 10 for SDG progress, Sebastian Kurz, Chancellor of Austria, outlined lessons learned

from Austria's COVID-19 response: the importance of testing, describing e-screening tests used in schools 2-3 times per week and that Austria, with 2 million tests per week for a population of 9 million, had the highest rate of testing globally; government support for small- and medium- sized enterprises, saving over 1 million jobs; and investment in digitization including EUR 1.4 billion to companies, public administration, and schools for broadband coverage by 2030. He highlighted Austria's contribution to COVAX, including 600,000 vaccine doses and another 1 million planned.

In a video message, Steve Lee, Organizing Partner, Major Group for Children and Youth, highlighted key outcomes of the ECOSOC Youth Forum 2021, which called on Member States to: prioritize universal affordable access to mental health services for youth; provide universal and affordable internet access; stop investment in coal, oil and gas, redirecting to clean energy; bring scaled-up nationally-determined contributions to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change 26th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP26) in November 2021; guarantee inclusion of youth with disabilities; and take an intersectional approach to capturing disaggregated data of young people. He stressed the importance of sharing decision-making power with youth and to include children on UN delegations and in the VNR process.

Melati Wijsen, Co-Founder of Bye Bye Plastic Bags and YouthTopia, in a video message, underscored: making youth equal partners in SDG implementation; investing in education; the importance of long-term partnerships; and the responsibility, urgency, and need among young people to "rise and rally." She described her work to successfully champion a ban on plastic bags in Bali, Indonesia, and that this youth-led initiative now exists in over 30 countries and led to the establishment of Youthtopia, which provides youth with changemaker skills.

### ***Keynote by the President of the UN Environment Assembly***

The statement by Sveinung Rotevatn, President of UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) and Minister of Environment and Climate, Norway, was not broadcast at the meeting due to technical issues.

Rotevatn said the pandemic has deterred progress on the 2030 Agenda, highlighting the need for more holistic approaches to respond to the negative impacts of environmental and economic crises, which are disproportionately inherited by marginalized groups.

In order to sufficiently address the three environmental challenges facing the world—climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss—he suggested:

- scaling up global climate action to deliver on the Paris Agreement commitments;
- establishing economic and socially sustainable pathways to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and enhance ecosystem integrity;
- enhancing capacity to achieve sound management of chemicals and waste;

- promoting effective global governance;
- adequate, predictable, and sustainable resource mobilization from all sources;
- an ambitious and realistic post-2020 global biodiversity framework; and
- developing measures that foster mainstreaming of environmental sustainability across economic sectors.

He noted that 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of the UN Environment Programme and invited Member States and stakeholders to take part in a special celebratory UNEA session.

### ***Voluntary National Reviews***

**Panel 1:** ANGOLA presented its first VNR, which highlighted the impact of recent pandemics, including SARS and COVID-19, but maintained these crises will not hinder national reforms to advance the country's economic and social ambitions. To this end, she noted that in June 2020 Angola created an SDG Platform to track implementation. She described policies and programmes to generate revenue, diversify exports, and enforce import substitution, noting 60,000 people have been reached through 788 projects. She also recognized the need to establish more schools to increase the number of children completing primary education. Given that 8 in 10 people are engaged in informal employment, she said that with support from the European Union and the UN Development Programme, Angola is developing a programme to bring more people into the formal economy.

DENMARK asked what action Angola will take to ensure girls, women, and all marginalized groups have equal access to education. The MAJOR GROUP FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH expressed concern about the millions of citizens in Angola who are excluded from the education system. PORTUGAL asked what role education will play in Angola's ambition to have a more diversified economy.

ANGOLA responded that they are working with the African Development Bank to issue more scholarships to women and girls to encourage education completion, and are also working with UNICEF to educate women on unwanted pregnancies, sexual violence, and sanitation.

In its first VNR, ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA called for replacing the GDP per capita criteria for concessional funding with a vulnerability index. Despite challenges, he highlighted many successes in SDG implementation, including: establishment of the Five Islands campus of the University of the West Indies; social protection initiatives; construction of affordable housing; investment in health infrastructure; support for private sector development and innovation; establishment of a science and innovation park; renewable energy projects; and appointment of the first Minister of the Blue Economy.

The UK asked what specific actions Antigua and Barbuda has taken to strengthen resilience and adaptation to climate change and what further support is needed from partners. SAINT LUCIA asked what mechanisms Antigua and Barbuda used to facilitate consultations and stakeholder engagement during the pandemic.

The NGO MAJOR GROUP asked what plans are in place to follow up on the VNR with stakeholder groups to ensure local ownership and buy-in.

In response, ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA said developed countries must fulfil the USD 100 billion climate finance pledge and commit 50% to adaptation. He also said climate finance has to reach local communities. With regard to stakeholder consultations, he noted there were limitations due to COVID-19 protocols, but the government commits to wider engagement with stakeholders going forward.

In its first VNR, CUBA highlighted its effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to one of the lowest mortality rates in Latin America, Cuban-produced vaccines and medication, and the deployment of 57 medical brigades in 40 countries, despite challenges posed by the United States' economic blockade. He said the path to SDG achievement is aligned with the National Economic and Social Development Plan, which was developed through a participatory approach and includes the empowerment of women; electrification; natural disaster preparedness; innovation in health; and social protection, among others. He called for renewed and bolstered multilateralism based on principles of solidarity.

The PHILIPPINES asked about Cuba's efforts to combat the adverse effects of climate change. NICARAGUA asked about the response to COVID-19. ZIMBABWE inquired about the specific actions undertaken to reduce inequalities in the face of COVID-19. SYRIA asked about specific measures relating to health and well-being of its citizens, including during the pandemic. The WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP inquired about specific rights for LGBTI groups. ALGERIA asked about the challenges in mobilizing resources. INDONESIA inquired about actions supporting women's participation in decision-making.

CUBA responded that answers would be provided in writing, stressed the tremendous efforts it faces in moving forward in the face of the blockade, and added the answers to these questions are also reflected in the National Economic and Social Development Plan.

BOLIVIA presented its first VNR, lamenting the 8.8% drop in GDP in 2020 and other regressions due to the pandemic. She highlighted the work of a national committee to implement a new socio-economic development plan guided by the SDGs, and efforts to reduce extreme poverty, such as through increases in the minimum wage. She noted the 2019 implementation of universal health coverage, including a prenatal subsidy, and establishment of a normative framework to reduce violence against women, ensure their political rights, and promote women's land ownership. She highlighted declines in illegal deforestation from 62 to 43% and an increase in reforestation.

The RUSSIAN FEDERATION asked about the post-pandemic strategy for achieving the SDGs. The EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC STAKEHOLDER GROUP asked how Bolivia will reduce poverty, achieve access to goods, guarantee public

education, and eliminate HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. MEXICO queried about public finance obstacles to SDG progress and the types of bilateral synergies necessary to resolve them.

BOLIVIA responded that: Indigenous People and peasants are enshrined as groups in their constitution and are legally guaranteed priority reparations; traditional knowledge, which has been integrated into the medical system, has been fundamental to contain the pandemic; there is need to re-channel tax revenue towards curbing other illnesses; and creating fiscal space for debt service suspension, relief of public debt, and easing liquidity restrictions is essential.

SAN MARINO noted that it began drafting its VNR in 2017 in consultation with local NGOs and other stakeholders. He said although San Marino does not have extreme forms of poverty, the pandemic has led to an increase in relative poverty, resulting in more inclusive social welfare assistance programmes. San Marino commits to reduce the student-teacher ratio to guarantee quality education, more job placement assistance, and increased financial resources for legal costs and at-home support for victims of violence. San Marino also seeks to enhance integration between hospitals and health services, diversify its economy, promote sustainable agriculture practices, and protect the environment.

ANDORRA asked how San Marino intends to make communities safer and ensure urban regeneration. MALTA asked how San Marino will ensure food security and sustainable agriculture practices. The VOLUNTEER STAKEHOLDER GROUP asked if San Marino has considered a universal basic income for its citizens to cushion the negative impacts of the pandemic. PARAGUAY queried how San Marino is looking at the water-energy nexus to promote the usage of renewable energy sources.

SAN MARINO responded that: its strategy for urban regeneration is based on increasing safety as an economic, social, and environment requirement; it is pursuing social awareness campaigns and certification programmes to achieve its food security and sustainable agriculture ambitions; and public authorities monitor water quality to ensure safe drinking water and it is one of the first countries to be carbon neutral or negative. He added that the government adopted a flexible scheme to ensure the continuity and protection of small businesses and the economy.

**Panel 2:** The DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) presented its first VNR, noting it was prepared in consultation with all ministries, agencies, and organizations. He said DPRK provides free medical care and education, and progress has been made in supporting the economy and "ensuring the cultural life" of its people. He stressed that disaster risk reduction is one of the top priorities, due to climate change and natural disasters. Moving forward, he said SDG implementation will optimize use of DPRK's own resources, technology, and self-reliance, strengthen data collection; and enhance partnerships with other countries and international organizations.

CUBA asked about the main obstacles in furthering sustainable development efforts and economic advancement. The NGO MAJOR GROUP asked: how the DPRK will include contributions from civil society in the future; what measures are taken to protect people with disabilities; what steps are being taken to resume cross-border economic activity; and how DPRK will address systemic discrimination.

In response, the DPRK said continued sanctions and natural disasters are the main obstacles to sustainable development. He described efforts to improve engagement of people with disabilities, including service centers, teacher training, and opportunities to participate in cultural, artistic and sports life. He said they are preparing a new law on the protection of people with disabilities.

The MARSHALL ISLANDS presented its first VNR, which contains an emphasis on the effect climate change has on the islands and its people, and is aligned with the country's National Strategic Plan. He highlighted the health strategy, which is based on their cultural value of "Kumiti Ejmour," meaning "health is a shared responsibility," as well as economic issues, noting the importance of the coconut tree, the blue economy, sustainable management of fisheries, trade, and private sector inclusion to create a pathway to self-sufficiency. He addressed advancements in good governance and human rights, particularly in strengthening the voice of Marshallese women and achieving gender equality. He said climate risks are mainstreamed into planning across government sectors and there are strategies to protect biodiversity, improve waste management, and promote green investment.

MICRONESIA asked about specific measures for building climate resilient infrastructure. GEORGIA asked about ways to address the availability of baseline data to establish goals and measure progress. The NGO MAJOR GROUP asked about how the government can improve data disparities between urban and rural societies.

The MARSHALL ISLANDS responded, stressing the importance of their National Adaptation Plan, calling it their "survival plan." Recognizing the importance of accurate data, he mentioned the household income and expenditure survey and the national census, which will focus on data gaps between urban and rural areas.

In presenting its first VNR, NICARAGUA discussed challenges affecting his country and region, including political unrest, recent Category 4 and 5 hurricanes, and COVID-19, amounting to its GDP sinking to 2010 levels. He stressed USD 2 billion per year in official development assistance (ODA) is needed to tackle the environmental crisis. He emphasized the "unjust and illegal unilateral and coercive measures" from developed countries that restrict access to financial resources, inhibit achievement of the SDGs, and undermine sovereignty. Despite these challenges, he noted that national achievements include: free public education for 1.8 million students and feeding programmes for all primary schoolers; universal health coverage and the construction of

the largest hospital network in Central America; increased safe drinking water, sewage systems, electricity, and quality roads; a food voucher programme, and a roadmap to achieve 72% vaccination by 2022.

CUBA asked what initiatives have achieved more gender equity and increased women's participation in decision-making and about policies to eradicate poverty. INDONESIA asked about programmes to eradicate hunger. INDIA inquired about climate change adaptation policies used to recover from recent hurricanes. SYRIA queried about the effects of the unilateral coercive measures that are hindering achievement of the SDGs. ZIMBABWE requested more information on how Nicaragua is responding to the pandemic. The NGO MAJOR GROUP, noting deep concern for Nicaragua's human rights crisis, corruption, and violence against Indigenous Peoples, women, and LGBTI persons, asked how the country intends to leave no one behind when discrimination and risk of harm persists.

NICARAGUA responded that its national cabinet is 56% female, and its human development plan is consistent with successful and continuing reforms of the criminal code. He underlined the quadrupling of resources for education, including for teacher training, programmes to eradicate illiteracy, and strengthening equitable access to higher education.

### *In the Cyber-Corridors*

Tuesday's opening of the High-level Segment of the HLPF was held in a hybrid format, allowing speakers to be at UN Headquarters or deliver their statements virtually. However, of the four high-level participants, the three from developing countries delivered statements by video, while one Head of State attended in person. Could this difference reflect existing inequalities, one of the common issues repeated by many delegations about the need for a fair and equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Is there a difference between a Head of State saying we need to "build back better" and to "leave no one behind" from the podium of the General Assembly Hall, than from a desk in his or her office? One delegate wondered if ministers may have less interest in participating in the HLPF, since they "lose presence" in front of a screen. No doubt, a benefit of attending the HLPF in person is the ability to capture the energy of a full room and channel it to convey a more charged message. Human interaction enables robust discussions and sharing ideas. But virtual meetings allow for more inclusivity for those who cannot afford to travel, providing the opportunity to deliver substantial messages from a more diverse set of actors, as demonstrated by the video messages shown during the presentation of VNRs.

Many have noted that virtual meetings give us a glimpse of people who would otherwise go unseen and unheard. As UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said on Tuesday morning, "The digital divide is the new face of inequality." Yet some wonder if inequality is embodied in the distribution of hybrid representation or if virtual meetings offer more possibilities for equal participation.