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#### **Summary of the 2021 Sustainable Development Goals** Moment: 20 September 2021

Designed to punctuate a "Decade of Action" with messages about the transformative change required to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 2021 SDG Moment was a gathering of contrasts: one where business as usual was confronted with the urgency of the pandemic and the impatience of youth for transformational action.

This second annual review of progress in the final decade of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development focused on how to maintain momentum amidst the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The day-long event, which coincides with the opening of the UN General Assembly, featured progress updates from 21 countries with moderated dialogues highlighting plans, pathways, and partners for recovery and beyond.

In a powerful symbol of intergenerational equity and solidarity, the President of the Republic of Korea introduced global superstars BTS, who "danced their way" through UN Headquarters to present a message of hope for future generations, a theme that would resonate throughout the session.

The SDG Moment was moderated by professional television presenters—Juju Chang (ABC News) and Sherwin Bryce-Pease (South African Broadcasting Corporation)—in a sleek new studio at UN Headquarters, installed with support from the Netherlands. The discussions were organized around five key themes:

- fostering intergenerational dialogue and youth-led solutions;
- addressing the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women and girls;
- · narrowing the digital divide;
- · localizing the SDGs; and
- · building effective inclusive institutions for justice, equality and

Opening the discussions, UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted some critical areas for action including: speeding up vaccine production and distribution globally; ensuring a sustainable and equitable economic recovery; addressing gender and social inequality; and achieving decarbonization targets by 2050.

Despite the presentation of data by The Economist Group indicating that the first 18 months of the pandemic had wiped out five years of SDG progress, pushing 97 million people back into

poverty, many speakers expressed confidence that the 2030 Agenda offers a "risk map" for an inclusive, equitable and sustainable recovery. UN General Assembly President Abdulla Shahid offered some "rays of hope," presenting five focus areas grounded in human rights and inextricably linked to the SDGs that could propel us forward including: closing the vaccine gap, rebuilding sustainably, respecting the rights of all, responding to the needs of the planet, and revitalizing the United Nations.

Recognizing the critical role of local actions in delivering on the SDGs, the event launched the "Local2030" coalition to connect local and regional governments and their associations, along with other local actors, to the UN, and to support local leaders in incubating and sharing solutions to advance the SDGs at the local level.

The SDG Moment took place virtually on Monday, 20 September 2021, ahead of the General Debate at the 76th UN General Assembly, as well as major high-level meetings on food systems, climate, energy, jobs and social protection. It also coincided with the

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launch of "#keepingthepromise" a new digital UN campaign that calls on people around the world to make a promise to take action for a better future for all.

#### A Brief History of the SDG Moment

In September 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Summit adopted "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (2030 Agenda)—a package that includes the 17 SDGs, 169 targets, and a framework for follow-up and review of implementation. The 2030 Agenda called on the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), established in July 2013 by UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution 67/290, to, *inter alia*, follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments. The UNGA resolution calls on the HLPF to meet under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) every year, and under the auspices of the UNGA every four years.

Six HLPF sessions have taken place under the auspices of ECOSOC since the 2030 Agenda was adopted, most recently in July 2021. The first session of the HLPF to convene under the auspices of the UNGA since the adoption of the SDGs, also called the SDG Summit, took place on 24-25 September 2019. UN Member States recognized that the world was not on track to achieve the SDGs and called on all actors to bring more ambition and urgency to their implementation efforts over the course of a "Decade of Action."

The Political Declaration of the SDG Summit expressed concern in the following areas:

- progress is slowing in many areas, including poverty eradication, hunger, gender equality, and wealth inequality;
- biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, plastic litter in the oceans, climate change, and disaster risk continue at rates that bring potentially disastrous consequences for humanity;
- violent extremism, terrorism, organized crime, corruption, illicit financial flows, global health threats, humanitarian crises, and forced displacement of people threaten to reverse decades of development progress; and
- conflicts and instability have endured, or intensified, and natural disasters have become more frequent and intense in many parts of the world, causing untold human suffering.

The Declaration requested the Secretary-General "to organize an annual moment in the context of the general debate of the General Assembly to highlight inspiring SDG Action."

In September 2020, the Secretary-General convened the <u>first SDG Moment</u> as a check-in on the status of the SDGs at the beginning of the Decade of Action, in light of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **SDG Moment Report**

The 2021 SDG Moment opened with a brief introduction by co-moderators Sherwin Bryce, South African Broadcasting Corporation, and Juju Chang, ABC News.

UN Secretary-General Guterres noted that the world is challenged as never before but people are not hopeless or helpless. He highlighted five areas for urgent action:

 addressing the pandemic response, which has been too slow and too unequal, by doubling vaccine production to reach 70% of the global population by the middle of 2022;

- a sustainable and equitable economic recovery, with people put before profit, and both taxation and financial reform;
- equal rights and seats at the tables of power for women and girls;
- ending the war on the planet, with zero climate change emissions by 2050 and USD 100 billion per year for climate action; and
- a people-led recovery.

In his opening remarks, UNGA President Abdulla Shahid (Maldives) recognized that the pandemic had severely impacted the SDGs, but noted that the SDGs provide "the most comprehensive and universal toolkit in our efforts to recover sustainably." Despite the reframing of the Decade of Action into a "Decade of Recovery," Shahid identified some "rays of hope" inextricably linked to the SDGs including:

- recovering from the pandemic and rebuilding sustainably (SDGs on health and jobs);
- responding to the needs of the planet (SDGs on clean energy, climate action, ocean and seas, biodiversity etc.); and
- strengthening human rights and UN revitalization, which cut across the entire Agenda.

He said that the SDG Moment provides us with an opportunity to reflect where we are, where we could be, what is holding us back, and the way forward.

Claire Casey, Global Head of Policy and Insights, The Economist Group, observed that the past 18 months had wiped out five years of SDG progress, exacerbating existing disparities, and plunging millions into extreme poverty. Highlighting the gender face of the pandemic, she reported that the number of employed women had declined by 54 million. She further emphasized that equality does not only benefit individuals but societies and noted that the economy would increase by USD 12.3 trillion if gender parity was achieved.

Moon Jae-in, President, Republic of Korea, emphasizing effective responses to the integrated challenges of our time, proposed that solutions must also transcend national boundaries. He outlined four urgent global responses in this regard: ensuring equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines; scaling up knowledge sharing and transfer of green recovery technologies; harnessing digital technologies without exacerbating social and economic inequalities; and "gathering wisdom" for inter-generational coexistence.

South Korean K-pop group BTS, in their capacity as Special Presidential Envoy for Future Generations and Culture, presented messages from fans around the world. Concluding that the overwhelming response from young people is one of hope, the group suggested referring to youth as "the welcome generation," closing with a typically upbeat video recording of their recent release "Permission to Dance," that was filmed at UN Headquarters.

## Leveraging the COVID-19 Response and Recovery to Accelerate SDG implementation

Intergenerational dialogue with SDG Advocates: In this intergenerational dialogue, a senior and a junior member of the UN Secretary-General's SDG Advocates, exchanged views about their own experiences in making a difference in their own communities. Graça Machel recounted her experience with Nelson Mandela in setting up "The Elders," a group of independent global leaders working together for peace and human rights and education for a better future. She said that the formation of the "The Elders" was informed by some of the members' experience as anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, and emphasized the importance of building

movements to bring about change since a collective voice cannot be ignored. Valentina Muñoz Rabanal spoke about her experience as a social media influencer and digital activist in Chile, where a youth movement protesting an increase in the price of subway tickets in 2018 brought about one of the biggest social movements in recent times using digital technologies.

Roundtable debate on leveraging the COVID-19 Response and Recovery to accelerate SDG implementation: Moderator Sherwin Bryce-Pease opened the segment by highlighting data indicating only 2% of the total global COVID-19 vaccination supply has been administered in Africa.

Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Africa, noted the region has already mobilized a substantial part of the resources needed to meet the continental target of 70% vaccination by mid-2022. Decrying "anti-competitive" measures in industrialized countries that are hampering these efforts, she underscored the need to scale up the region's production capacity, building on efforts in countries such as Senegal and South Africa, and to extend this to other neglected diseases such as measles.

Noting that high-income economies—which have largely achieved near-universal vaccination—have started to bounce back from the pandemic, Achim Steiner, Administrator, UN Development Programme (UNDP), highlighted how the Global Dashboard on Vaccine Equity contributes to a more effective response by offering insights on where the pandemic is further opening up, or deepening existing inequities.

The discussion further highlighted the importance of increasing both the fiscal space for developing countries to build forward better, with Songwe stressing that African countries have received a fraction of the International Monetary Fund's USD 650 million Special Drawing Rights (SDR) stimulus package. Underlining that the SDGs offer a framework for an inclusive and sustainable recovery, Steiner suggested that making progress towards redistributing "a fraction of global wealth" for the SDG push will be a key test for the upcoming G20 Summit.

#### Plans, Pathways, and Partners for Recovery and Beyond

ECOSOC President Collen Vixen Kelapile noted a majority of countries that lack access to COVID vaccines, therapeutics and diagnosis have experienced regression rather than advances in achieving the SDGs, and welcomed reports in the 2021 HLPF Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that some middle- and low-income countries have responded to the pandemic by introducing structural changes, including social protection.

Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, President of Ghana and Co-Chair of the Secretary-General's SDG Advocates, described how the pandemic has pushed millions back into poverty and hunger, and called for action to close the USD 2.5 trillion SDG financing gap, and for innovative solutions that can serve as SDG enablers.

Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway and Co-Chair of the UN Secretary-General's SDG Advocates, described how the world is grappling with crises in health, the economy, and climate change that demand transformative action and mobilization of political will, including fulfilment of commitments in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on finance and debt relief. She also called for clear political commitment on food systems and ending hunger at the upcoming UN Food Systems Summit.

#### Contributions from Heads of State and Government

**Africa:** Abdel Fattah Al Sisi, President, Egypt, noted the need to redouble efforts on the achievement of the SDGs since they are crucial to sustainable and resilient recovery from COVID-19 and other similar global challenges such as climate change, which also has an effect on health, food security, and poverty eradication.

Uhuru Kenyatta, President, Kenya, spoke about Kenya's SDG Roadmap 2016 with prioritized action in certain goals like housing, health coverage, and food security that could underpin other goals or have a multiplier effect.

Lazarus McCarthy Chakwera, President, Malawi, emphasized the need for collective action for recovery, and noted that his country was targeting health, poverty, decent work, and education through a 10-year pandemic-related recovery plan that includes cash transfers and food security measures.

Filipe Jacinto Nyusi, President, Mozambique, said that his country has aligned its national budget and planning instruments with the 2030 Agenda, but the economic and social impacts of the pandemic require a recovery plan with a focus on zero hunger, expanding health facilities, quality education, increased capacity for distance learning, and opportunities for self-employment.

Julius Maada Bio, President, Sierra Leone, said his country has identified SDGs 4 (quality education) and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) as accelerator goals for the other SDG targets, highlighting, *inter alia*, increased investments in access to quality education that have resulted in improved performance indicators for the sector, despite the pandemic. On peace and security, he highlighted the operationalization of a national commission and provision of legal aid to citizens, among achievements.

Hakainde Hichilema, President, Zambia, highlighted the pandemic's disruption of agricultural production, and stressed the need to explore innovative information and communications technology (ICT) solutions to bridge the gap in services delivery, especially in the health and education sectors.

Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, President, Zimbabwe, highlighted financial and institutional reforms aimed at promoting equitable access to quality social services and social protection, rolling out free vaccines, and enhancing sustainable land and water resources management to boost agricultural productivity.

Asia and the Pacific: David Kabua, President, Marshall Islands, said that the vulnerabilities that small island developing states (SIDS) ordinarily experience, including access to critical supplies, had been exacerbated by the pandemic, and noted that this situation was now compounded by other challenges to the wellbeing of the population, including the adverse effects of climate change. This is why the Marshall Islands has embarked on a "One Nation" approach to deal with multiple risks and adaptation measures in an integrated manner, he added.

Suga Yoshihide, Prime Minister, Japan, stated that international cooperation and innovation were needed to build back better with a focus on establishing more resilient health systems, through universal health protection and human security, as well as increasing digitization, achieving gender equality, and improving food security through modernized agricultural practices.

Prayut Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister, Thailand, said that the pandemic has revealed existing vulnerabilities and, as a result, Thailand is aiming to leave no one behind by improving budget allocations for health, particularly for the elderly, closing the digital divide, and using innovative agricultural practices.

Latin America and the Caribbean: Underscoring the need for equitable recovery, Luis Alberto Arce Catacora, President, Bolivia, said that a unanimous voice to safeguard social justice was indispensable along with economic diversification, employment generation, equitable distribution of income, protection of Mother Earth, ensuring access to healthcare and food, and combating climate change.

Iván Duque Márquez, President, Colombia, stated that the 2030 Agenda is the blueprint for sustainable recovery and added that Colombia continues to lead on the SDGs by integrating them in all of its development plans and policies, as shown in its third VNR and in its ambitious nationally determined contribution (NDC) target to achieve a 51% reduction of greenhouse gases by 2030.

Miguel Díaz Canel Bermúdez, President, Cuba, noted that some of the major impediments to the achievement of the SDGs were exacerbated during the pandemic, including economic inequalities and social exclusion. He called for targeted action in these areas, along with strengthened South-South cooperation and solidarity that could assist in overcoming these challenges. He called for the lifting of the blockade, which is the major impediment for the achievement of the SDGs in Cuba. As "revolutionaries, we are optimists," he concluded.

Alejandro Giammattei Falla, President, Guatemala, identified 10 national development priorities, but noted that responding to the pandemic requires placing greater emphasis on: new models of financing; enhancing access to vaccines; addressing climate change impacts, including water and food security; and protecting vulnerable populations.

Mohamed Irfaan Ali, President, Guyana, observed that despite the pandemic's added impact on existing challenges faced by SIDS, the international community should not be distracted from realizing the SDGs. Reversing these trends will require resolve and support from the international community, he added.

Laurentino Cortizo Cohen, President, Panama, said the country's strategic plan, which is aligned with the SDGs, is focused on: inclusion, strengthening democracy, a joint vision for equal opportunities, transformation for sustainable development, and measures for accelerated recovery in view of the pandemic's impacts.

**Europe:** János Áder, President, Hungary, outlined accomplishments on health, including the vaccination of 60% of the population, expansion of renewable energy capacity, and plans for a Planet Budapest Sustainability Expo (29 November – 5 December 2021).

Gitanas Nausėda, President, Lithuania, called for investment in climate neutrality and described his country's national climate change management agenda, with a commitment to climate neutrality by 2050.

Gian Carlo Venturini and Marco Nicolini, Captains Regent, San Marino, noting the uncommon crisis of the pandemic, called for an acceleration of responses to the world's most serious challenges using the principles underpinning the SDGs. They announced that San Marino is working to become one of the first carbon negative countries.

Mette Frederiksen, Prime Minister, Denmark, remarked that "the Decade of Action requires more action." She outlined Denmark's green energy transition, stating it is addressing climate change and contributing to millions of jobs. Noting that the pandemic has clearly revealed our co-dependence, Frederiksen underlined the need for a strong multilateral system with political leadership to address emerging global challenges.

Angela Merkel, Chancellor, Germany, described the pandemic as an opportunity to make lives more sustainable and to accelerate implementation of the SDGs. She described climate change as an intergenerational equity challenge, which is now reflected in Germany's increased ambition for carbon neutrality by 2045.

Pedro Sánchez Pérez-Castejón, Prime Minister, Spain, outlined the country's second VNR, noting efforts to strengthen Spain's political and social pact to reduce social inequities and meet its climate and environmental action commitments. He echoed calls to increase financial support for vulnerable countries whose progress has been eroded by the pandemic.

Stefan Löfven, Prime Minister, Sweden, described his country as a strong voice for global implementation of the 2030 Agenda, noting the SDGs are our roadmap for achieving "more, not less cooperation" in the wake of the pandemic. He said that collaboration with four Swedish cities and local government associations of cities and local regions in developing the country's second VNR has clearly revealed that most SDG progress is happening at the local level, and emphasized the role of "mission-driven partnerships" in building momentum on the ground.

#### Spotlight on Pathways and Partners

**Connectivity: Narrowing the digital divide:** Opening the discussion, Moderator Sherwin Bryce-Pease emphasized the importance of digital connectivity for the realization of the SDGs, describing it as "SDG Zero."

Paula Ingabire, Minister of Information, Communication, Technology and Innovation, Rwanda, described her country's achievements in the realm of digital inclusion in pursuit of the knowledge economy. She pointed out that the majority of the world's unconnected people reside in Africa.

Bill Tai, Chair and Co-Founder of ACTAI Global, a coalition of athletes, conservationists, technologists, artists, and innovators, described the catalytic role of connectivity for education and discussed the falling marginal costs of infrastructure, and the role of public-private partnerships.

Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director, International Telecommunications Union, recalled that she and others had called for a dedicated digital SDG, now referred to as the "invisible SDG." She outlined plans to connect all schools and underlined the key role of connectivity in getting the SDGs back on track.

The gender equality imperative: Sima Sami Bahous, Executive Director, UN Women, emphasized that gender equality and empowering goals are an integral part of all aspects of sustainable development, including in competing priorities such as health, education, and justice. She said that the added burden placed on women and girls for the bulk of household responsibilities during the pandemic has further negatively impacted their options for pursuing employment opportunities.

Melinda French-Gates, Co-Chair and Trustee, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, indicated that COVID-19 has laid bare the structural inequities that already existed in society, noting that women are going to lose 2 million jobs this year on top of the 13 million women that are currently out of work. She said during lockdowns unpaid work and care-giving burdens have gone up, while women's job opportunities have gone down. She highlighted three clusters of measures that can help ease the burden of unpaid work on women, notably:

- cash, through targeted social protection systems for women;
- care, through subsidies that reflect women's unpaid contribution to family care, including for children and the elderly; and
- data, through enhancing the production of quality and amount of disaggregated data to identify gender parity gaps and vulnerabilities.

In the ensuing discussion, French-Gates and Bahous reflected on persistent barriers, as well as emerging opportunities to leverage women's contributions. They highlighted the importance of:

- building on the momentum created by the Generation Equality Forum to mainstream the needs of women and girls in pandemic response policies and implementation;
- localizing the SDGs, and integrating community needs into national policy processes; and
- increasing the availability of gender-disaggregated data across sectors.

Discussing women's response to crosswinds such as a rise in domestic violence, or the "pandemic of misinformation," Bahous and French-Gates highlighted some best practices from around the world, including: India's experience in channeling accurate information through women's collectives and other spaces where "women talk"; examples from countries that are providing women with mobile phones to receive direct cash transfers and access to credit; using government procurement systems to encourage small-scale women producers to supply healthy food; and efforts in South Africa and elsewhere to create innovative safe spaces where women can report on domestic violence.

Youth in Action: Shaping the future now! Moderated by Juju Chang, this session also featured filmed interviews with youth leaders and social entrepreneurs.

Vladislav Kaim, Member of the UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, Moldova, described his work on promoting green jobs so that young people can reclaim the dignity of work after the pandemic, and underlined that young people are "not the future but the present." He cautioned against a celebratory approach to young people because their contributions are often forced to supplement failures in leadership at the highest levels. Kaim added that government failures of vision sometimes place young people in a position of having to take on leadership responsibility in the absence of sufficient resources, with implications for their wellbeing and mental health.

Yande Banda, Chair, Transform Education, Zambia, also called for meaningful participation for young people that goes beyond posters and slogans. She demanded more opportunities for cocreation and partnership for youth-led and girl-led organizations and movements, including pursuing gender justice. Banda also called for systematic integration of youth into positions of power and the eradication of hostile environments that perpetuate patriarchy, underpinned by transformative, gender- and climate-informed

education. Pointing to the presence of Zambia's President at the UN General Assembly, she called on him to appoint a special advisor on children and girls.

Localizing the SDGs: Delivering for and with people: This spotlight session highlighted some opportunities and challenges for tackling the SDGs by cities, towns, and urban centers. It also saw the launch of the "Local2030 coalition," an initiative to bridge the gap between local governments and stakeholders and the UN processes on the SDGs.

Giorgio Marrapodi, Italy, expressed his support for the "Local2030" coalition that supports on-the-ground delivery of the SDGs with a focus on those furthest behind. He noted that Local2030 supports local leaders in collaboratively incubating and sharing solutions, unlocking bottlenecks, and implementing strategies that advance the SDGs at the local level.

Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, Mayor, Freetown, Sierra Leone, spoke about her experience localizing the SDGs in Freetown through a combined top-down, bottom-up approach. She said that creating the space for community engagement and interventions at the local level helps identify and address barriers to implementation and facilitates the dialogue between the national and local levels.

Patricia Miranda Menezes, Rede ODS Brasil, a grassroots organization, stated that the 2030 Agenda cannot be achieved without local and city involvement, emphasized the importance of networking to engage all of the necessary actors and to exchange experiences, and said effective communication modalities are important to convey the meaning of the SDGs to the majority of people.

In the ensuing conversation, Marrapodi noted how localizing the SDGs was considered at a meeting of development ministers at the G20—the first of its kind—and how multilateralism can contribute to the sharing of experiences and best practices. In response, Aki-Sawyer noted that it is also important to note the differences between localities in developing and developed countries, and that these specificities should be taken into account, as well as the need for financing, in order to truly "leave no one behind." Menezes added that disseminating as much information as possible about the agenda was necessary to engage actors and change people's behavior.

Effective and inclusive institutions for justice, equality and trust: The segment opened with a "virtual TED-talk" by Cat Tully, Founder, School of International Futures, outlining how to future-proof institutions to accelerate SDG implementation. Tully outlined three practical ideas for creating "fairer institutions": assessing policies for their intergenerational impact; building an effective oversight mechanism with capacities to, *inter alia*, assess trends, and build institutional networks to "listen and act"; and genuinely open up national SDG planning processes to citizens in order to reimagine and co-create a shared future.

In the ensuing moderated dialogue, Wayne Henry, Director General, Planning Institute of Jamaica, discussed what it took to rally diverse institutions and civil society actors around the country's Vision 2030 strategy. He identified the role of participatory task forces and uninterrupted implementation through a series of midterm action frameworks as important elements for success.

Observing that "communities are powerful," Pupul Bisht, Founder, Decolonizing Futures Initiative, underscored the importance of tapping the power of collective imagination. She noted that rather than slowing down progress, such engagement can help policy makers to find solutions to complex problems, and is a prerequisite for localizing the SDGs.

Salil Shetty, Vice President, Global Programs, Open Society Foundations, emphasized the uneven nature of SDG progress within countries and regions. Citing the case of India, he added that while "children may not know about the SDGs, they know they should have rights despite their social status." Observing that more than 100 countries introduced pandemic-related emergency measures to curb civil freedoms, Shetty stressed that to instigate reforms at both national and multilateral levels, the question is not whether people trust their government, but rather "do governments trust their own people?"

Describing the SDGs as a perfect example of "a radical, future-focused ambition," Tully regretted that governance tools are lagging behind. Bisht called for new narratives and communication channels that "change the story about the future."

#### Reflections and Perspectives

Mari Pangestu, Managing Director of Development Policies and Partnerships, World Bank, described the scale of the Bank's COVID programme, underlining partnerships and financing. She noted that recovery will be limited by a number of factors including the rise in debt vulnerability, and called for a "paradigm shift" that will recognize the linkages between climate change, COVID, and poverty if a lost decade is to be avoided.

Inger Andersen, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), warned that recovery spending is not rolled out in ways that will help tackle the world's multiple crises, and called for specific commitments on climate change and financing from the G20 countries. Andersen called on central banks and banking systems to understand the stresses linked to climate change, including stranded assets.

Elliot Harris, UN Chief Economist and Assistant-Secretary General for Economic Development, welcomed governments' steadfast commitment to the SDGs and leaving no one behind, notwithstanding the stated challenges of limited fiscal space and debt. He underlined the role of overseas partners in addressing issues around fiscal space and access to vaccines, and highlighted actions that can also be taken domestically, including subsidy reform.

Solange Maria Pinto Ribeiro, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Neoenergia, and Vice Chair, UN Global Compact Board, underlined the commitment of governments to a global response given the need for cooperation and solidarity to secure the delivery of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.

Speakers underscored the rights of young people to challenge the status quo.

Civil society perspectives: Stefano Plato, Coordinator, Civil Society Financing for Development Group, regretted that the discussions had not presented a clear plan for breaking away from the current multilateral system that is still dominated by the Global North. Noting that no SDG push will work without a commitment to pervasive systemic reforms, he called for "decolonization of the global economy" by restoring power to the UN "where we all have a seat at the table." He further advocated for a follow up conference on financing for development to explore five areas of reform: shifting financial decision making to the UN to enlarge developing countries' fiscal space; assessing systemic risks of an unregulated

finance sector; addressing the developmental impacts of trade and investment frameworks; scaling back the focus on private financing by revisiting public ODA commitments; and ensuring democratic governance of ICTs.

Mark Kato Nabimany, Fellow, International Disability Alliance, highlighted how the pandemic is limiting already scarce opportunities for 15% of the world's population. Noting that people living with disabilities have a lot to contribute to an inclusive recovery, he called for more responsive education. He also called for skills training and social protection programmes to allow people with disabilities to compete for employment and increase their independence.

Ayman Babar, Researcher, Roots for Equity, highlighted the pandemic's disproportionate impact on small and landless women farmers. She cautioned against pushing corporate interests as a response to the climate emergency, noting that these pave the way for industrial agriculture that coopts Indigenous knowledge, contributes to land grabs and deprives rural communities of their resources. She described how industrialized agriculture pursued by corporate interests promotes unsustainable land use practices such as a shift from diverse, and climate-resilient local food crops to biofuels and cash crops, further exacerbating food insecurity, dislocation, and loss of livelihoods.

#### The Way Ahead

In a brief closing segment, Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, and Jeffrey Sachs, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the SDGs, engaged in a moderated conversation about how to move ahead with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Mohammed said that part of the answer lies in scaling up the solutions and the funding that have proven to be successful, along with bridging the intergenerational gap in order to enable youth to "try their hands at the steering wheel," opening the space for more forward-looking and innovative solutions. She also said that we need to "stop thinking poorly for the poor," and trust that they too could reach a high level of ambition if provided with the necessary means and support.

Sachs acknowledged that the problems are big and that they entail enormous coordination efforts, which is why "the pace is not fast enough." On the other hand, he noted that the SDGs are really capturing the imagination of the people and that, sooner rather than later, the pace would pick up because of the momentum originating from people's genuine interest in the SDGs.

The SDG Moment closed at 5:12 pm EDT (UTC-4) on a note of hope that "Progress is Possible" with a reprise of the BTS music video featured in the opening segment.

#### A Brief Analysis of the SDG Moment

"We don't need to worry

'Cause when we fall, we know how to land (we know how to land) Don't need to talk the talk, just walk the walk tonight 'Cause we don't need permission to dance." (BTS, Permission to Dance)

The second SDG Moment was a virtual gathering of contrasts. In a sign of COVID-19 times, the event was broadcast on multiple platforms from an impressive new, Dutch-funded studio at UN Headquarters in New York. Two professional broadcasters, Juju

Chang (ABC News) and Sherwin Bryce-Pease (South African Broadcasting Corporation), brought pace and momentum to a series of topical panels that underlined the contrast with more conventional interventions by Heads of State and Government seeking to uphold the continued relevance of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the face of a global pandemic and multiple social and ecological crises. The panel interviews took on a "Davos style" conversation with lots of probing questions crafted by well-briefed presenters, leading to occasional high moments in which some participants issued pointed challenges to governments.

Panelists were put through their paces in a series of lively interviews on issues of digital connectivity and the digital divide (a theme that some prescient advocates argued should have been the subject of an SDG when they were being negotiated), gender justice, youth leadership, localizing delivery of the SDGs, and effective institutional building. Intensive preparatory work by the Secretariat in the identification of participants seemed to pay off, breaking new ground in terms of direct citizen engagement within the space of the UN General Assembly. The refreshing new format is expected to set a precedent for future SDG Moments and other UN events.

The investment in new production values combined with the spectacular participation of the South Korean K-Pop band, BTS, resulted in unprecedented numbers of young people turning to YouTube for the group's intervention at the General Assembly Hall (6.5 million views) and the music video recorded in and around UN Headquarters (11 million). The group has also lent its support to a social media campaign (#keepingthepromise), inviting individuals to commit to active citizenship and the creation of a better world.

Organizers of the SDG Moment are mindful that the SDGs lack a "deep process" for engaging and nudging government responses. Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are regarded as a relatively weak accountability mechanism, so COVID has, paradoxically perhaps, presented an opportunity to leverage renewed government attention. In other words, the rationale for the SDGs has never been more clear to governments and civil society because COVID has exposed and dramatized in real time the inequalities and fractures of our international system, and failures to adopt holistic approaches to public health. There is some limited evidence of this COVID response or solidarity with the recent multilateral decision on Special Drawing Rights.

A recurring theme throughout the day was an unstinting display of confidence that the SDGs represent an opportunity to reframe the world's response to COVID-19 in a spirit of equity, inclusion, and accelerated progress towards sustainable development. In contrast, others insisted on drawing attention to the evidence from the real time experience of the pandemic that deep inequalities and fractures remain the order of the day. As one speaker noted, some developed countries are experiencing an "embarrassment of vaccine riches" while vast swathes of the world's population go without in a system of "vaccine apartheid" accompanied, in Africa, by debt and the risk of another "lost decade."

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator Achim Steiner noted that before the pandemic the world was making notable progress, with the greatest gains in industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9) and poverty alleviation (SDG 1). UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index showed that 271 million people had been lifted out of poverty in India alone in just a ten-year period. Comments by panelist Salil Shetty from the Open Society,

reflecting on his work with rural communities in India, stood in stark contrast with those earlier UNDP findings. Shetty reported on the "two worlds" in India: the connected India of large numbers of billionaires, and the India of spiraling inequalities where there is a near collapse in trust in government in the wake of its COVID response. Consistent with long-standing trends in wider inequalities, women have borne the brunt of the COVID pandemic.

Claire Casey of The Economist Group told participants that five years of progress on the SDGs had been wiped out in just 18 months, with an estimated 97 million people pushed back into poverty.

The SDG Moment heard that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, because of increased burdens of unpaid work and its impact on women's participation in the labor force. Even before the pandemic, women's participation in the labor market was only 47%, in comparison to men's participation at 72%. The pandemic has exacerbated these trends, and, with the current state of affairs, it could take 40 years to achieve gender parity.

#### Worlds Apart – Move it, Move it....

The wait is over The time is now, so let's do it right (BTS)

Perhaps the most intriguing and telling contrast of the day was marked by the arrival of Moon Jae-in, President of the Republic of Korea, accompanied by his Special Envoy for Future Generations and Culture, the global music and social media phenomenon, BTS, a seven-member South Korean K-Pop group also known as the "Bangtan Boys." The impact of their ARMY ("Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth) fanbase was immediately visible in their takeover of the comments section of the UN YouTube livestream. From the UN General Assembly Hall, the band members announced that they had come to the SDG Moment to share stories of future generations, reporting on their own conversations with young people across the world during the pandemic. They described the future as "the unexplored territory where we-more than anyone—shall spend our time." Refusing the label of "COVID's lost generation," they implored leaders not to "talk as if the end has been written." The appearance of BTS was the result of an extraordinary effort on the part of the SDG Moment organizers who spent months navigating and negotiating the reputational, legal, and COVID implications. The band members arrived fully vaccinated, and the work paid off in outreach to a new global, connected demographic.

The intergenerational symbolism of a Head of State introducing pop idols at the premier global governance stage set the tone for one of the dominant themes of the SDG Moment: intergenerational solidarity and the pressing demands of youth leaders.

SDG Advocate Valentina Muñoz Rabanal quietly set out to challenge the notion that children can be deprived of a voice in decisions about their future just because they do not have a vote. Citing the examples of Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, Rabanal insisted that there is no age qualification when it comes to changing the world and called for new forms of participation and political influence in which children and adolescents can be more than just spectators, in which they can become protagonists for change. She invited her listeners to turn family dinner tables—where children first learn to be seen and not heard—into "decision tables"

where they can learn how to think politically and do not have to ask permission to speak their mind.

Vladislav Kaim, a Member of the Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change from Moldova, countered conventional, often patronizing, notions of youth participation. He also cautioned against some celebratory views on youth leadership in the context of climate change and the SDGs, pointing out that young people's contributions are often necessary to supplement failures in current leadership circles. Moreover, young people who take on leadership responsibilities, without the necessary resources, can also suffer consequences in terms of their mental wellbeing. Yande Banda, Chair of Transform Education, Zambia, reinforced the call for meaningful and systematic engagement with youth-led and girl-led movements in place of posters and slogans. Both youth leaders spoke for 101 million children who fell below minimum reading levels in 2020 as a result of COVID-19, and many others.

The SDG Moment also addressed ways in which the SDGs can connect to the local or place-based agendas because local spaces are ultimately the key sites of delivery and development. In Latin America this is best understood and developed in notions of the "cosmovision." Some speakers indicated that establishing a space for local-global conversations can have a twofold benefit by providing a framework for development policy at the local level and informing the global level of the real challenges and concerns on the ground.

Jeffrey Sachs, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the SDGs, underscored the importance of connectivity, communication, and information to disseminate the SDGs and capture the public's imagination. However, the relationship between local, often pluralist movement-based demands on the ground and the SDGs can be understood as a much more subtle two-way conversation. As one insider noted, "this is not about turning the SDGs into celebrities."

Emergent demands for a "pluriversal" approach to development remind us that it is governments and the multilateral system that are often struggling to catch up with appropriate, regenerative approaches to being in the world and respecting Mother Earth. As Latin American and Indigenous voices demand, this is about a post-colonial vision of a world capable of containing many worlds, not one newly dominant narrative. These alternative and challenging understandings are emerging within the UN system in fora such as the Interactive Dialogues of the General Assembly on Harmony with Nature, based on calls for a move away from a human-centered worldview or "anthropocentrism." Many countries and local government bodies have already moved to enshrine rights of nature in their constitutional and legislative codes.

#### Taking over the "Steering Wheel" of Leadership Today

The wait is over
The time is now, so let's do it right
Yeah, we'll keep going
And stay up until we see the sunrise (BTS)

The stirring voices of young leaders, building on calls for gender justice, echoed through the SDG Moment, prompting Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed to ask how we can use their energy to "make the intergenerational leadership transition."

Together with Sachs, she reflected on how young people have been firmly putting their hands on the steering wheel, which is something to be welcomed.

Participants discussed mechanisms to institutionalize that commitment to intergenerational solidarity ("future proofing"). They were invited to examine practical examples of national initiatives already responding to youthful calls for today's leaders to recognize that they must walk alongside, listen to, and engage with the young people who will "spend their time" in the "future we want" and live with the consequences of today's decision-making. Cat Tully, Founder of the School of International Futures, underlined that perhaps the central tension at the heart of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs is the contrast that persists between the design of our "top-down and backward looking" governmental and economic institutions and the demands for a step change, as promised in the UN Secretary-General's recent report, *Our Common Agenda*. The claim that today's dominant institutions were designed for yesterday's world and to address yesterday's problems was repeated throughout the session.

The SDG Moment witnessed much discussion about the need for a pivot, a paradigm shift in terms of policy and direction. But as thoughtful reflection sessions throughout the day alluded, with global wealth and power concentrated in the hands of a few, did this Moment inject the necessary sense of urgency?

As noted by Stefano Plato, Coordinator, Civil Society Financing for Development Group, "No SDG push will work without a commitment to pervasive systemic reforms." This echoed an earlier challenge by Steiner, calling on the upcoming G20 Summit to demonstrate resolve to redistribute "a fraction of global wealth" to deliver on the SDGs. Plato equated this to no less than a "decolonization of the global economy" through a follow-up conference on financing for development to explore fundamental areas of reform.

# "Rays of Hope:" Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel? Yeah, we'll keep going And stay up until we see the sunrise And we'll say (BTS)

At the SDG Moment it was clear that limited progress on the SDGs has been hard won, uneven, and fragile. The pandemic has laid bare the structural inequities that already existed before 2015: the most affected have been the poor, women, children and youth, Indigenous Peoples, and the elderly. Paradoxically, the pandemic is now presented as a "2020" vision to "leverage" the reforms that have been halting and fragmented to date, with a view to finally correcting these disparities with targeted interventions, including a strengthening of social protection systems, democratic renewal and engagement through communication, access to information and connectivity. As indicated by Claire Casey, Global Head of Policy and Insights at the Economist Impact, "A nation that fails women, fails." But perhaps, more broadly speaking, "a nation that fails its people and planet, fails utterly." The SDG Moment was a gathering of contrasts because the debate has—in many ways—only begun.

#### **Upcoming Meetings**

**UN Food Systems Summit 2021:** The Summit will launch bold new actions to deliver progress on all 17 SDGs, each of which relies to some degree on healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems. **date:** 23 September 2021 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** un.org/en/food-systems-summit/

Jobs and social protection for poverty elimination: The High-level Event will be convened by the UN Secretary-General and the Prime Ministers of Canada and Jamaica as co-conveners of the Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond Initiative (FfDI). The virtual event will be co-organized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as part of Cluster II on the socio-economic response within the FfDI. date: 28 September 2021 location: virtual www: un.org/en/coronavirus/financing-development

Youth4Climate - Driving Ambition: The meeting will offer young people worldwide the opportunity to develop concrete proposals ahead of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 26th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 26). It will have four major themes: youth driving ambition; sustainable recovery; non-state actors' engagement; and climate-conscious society. dates: 28-30 September 2021 location: Milan, Italy www: minambiente.it/pagina/towards-cop26-pre-cop-and-youth-event-youth4climate-driving-ambition

**UN World Data Forum 2021:** This forum will bring together data and statistical experts and users from all sectors to spur data innovation, mobilize high-level political and financial support for data, and build a pathway to better data for sustainable development. **dates:** 3-6 October 2021 **location:** Bern, Switzerland and virtual **www:** unstats.un.org/unsd/undataforum

**LDC Future Forum:** The forum will bring together the academic community, policy makers and practitioners to solicit new thinking on the challenges and make policy recommendations for least developed countries (LDCs). The Forum will contribute to the 5th UN Conference on LDCs, which will convene in January 2022. **dates:** 5-7 October 2021 **location**: Helsinki, Finland **www:** un.org/ldc5/content/ldc-future-forum

UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP 15): The UN Biodiversity Conference (fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15), tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, and fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization is being held in two phases. Phase one takes place virtually and will include a High-Level Segment from 12-13 October. Phase two will be an in-person meeting in Kunming, China, from 25 April to 8 May 2022. dates: 11-15 October 2021 location: virtual www: cbd.int/conferences/2021-2022

World Health Summit: The Summit is a strategic global health forum convening leaders in politics, science, medicine, the private sector and civil society, with the SDGs at its core. Central topics in 2021 are: vaccines, the role of the EU in global health, mental health, artificial intelligence, lessons learned in pandemic preparedness, and the World Health Organization (WHO) Council on the Economics of Health for All. It is convened under the

patronage of Germany, France, the European Commission, and the WHO. **dates:** 24-26 October 2021 **location:** Berlin, Germany and virtual **www:** worldhealthsummit.org/summit.html

UNFCCC COP 26: The 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 26) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 16), and the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 3) will convene in Glasgow. dates: 31 October - 12 November 2021 location: Glasgow, Scotland, UK www: unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/conferences/glasgow-climate-change-conference

Fifth UN Conference on Least Developed Countries (LDCs): This conference will undertake a comprehensive review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the LDCs for the decade 2011-2020. dates: 23-27 January 2022 location: Doha, Qatar www: un.org/ldc5/

5th Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA):
The second part of UNEA-5 will take place under the theme
"Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable
Development Goals." Its aim will be to connect and consolidate
environmental actions within the context of sustainable development
and motivate the sharing and implementation of successful
approaches. The in-person meeting of UNEA-5 will be followed by
a Special Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-SS),
to be held 3-4 March 2022, to commemorate the 50th anniversary
of the creation of UNEP in 1972. dates: 28 February-2 March
2021 location: Nairobi, Kenya www: environmentassembly.
unenvironment.org/unea5

**Stockholm +50:** Sweden will host an international event marking the 50th anniversary of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment and the creation of UNEP. **dates:** 2-3 June 2022 **location:** Stockholm, Sweden **www:** government.se/government-policy/stockholm50/

**HLPF 2022:** The 10th session of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development will take place over eight days in July 2022 to review implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. **dates:** July 2022 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf

For additional upcoming events, see <a href="see">sdg.iisd.org/</a>

#### Glossary

Glossaly		
	2030 Agenda	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
	ECOSOC	UN Economic and Social Council
	HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable
		Development
	ICTs	Information and communication technologies
	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
	SIDS	Small island developing states
	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
	UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
	UNGA	UN General Assembly
	VNR	Voluntary National Review