

HLPF 2022 Highlights: Tuesday, 12 July 2022

The HLPF held a dialogue with civil society representatives during the morning. Twelve VNRs were presented during morning and afternoon sessions.

Vision of Civil Society: Leaving No One Behind in Recovering Better

Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, highlighted the important role of civil society in reaching those furthest behind, and their valuable role in informing the 2023 Summit, emphasizing “we need to hear your diverse voices everywhere.”

MGoS Coordination Mechanism Co-Chair, Mabel Bianco, President, Fundacion para Estudio e Investigación de la Mujer, recalled the appreciation civil society had felt at the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, but noted progress is lacking. She urged governments to make meaningful political commitments that leave no one behind.

MGoS Coordination Mechanism Co-Chair, Ajay Jha, Director, Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants Society, India, moderated the session. Among civil society’s priorities, he highlighted: improved vaccine equity, addressing the debt crisis, and stronger climate action.

Wezzie Chimwala, Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO), Malawi, called for stronger government recognition of the value volunteers bring to SDG implementation and accountability.

Wali Haider, Focal Point for Farmers’ Major Group at UNEP, prioritized: access and control to land for a more sustainable prosperity; and community farming over corporate, industrial farming.

Emilia Reyes, Women’s Major Group, called out “disaster profiteering,” which prevents vaccine equity, and called for a fourth financing for development conference.

Speaking as a refugee from the war in Ukraine, Svetlana Slesarenok, Founder and Director, Black Sea Women’s Club, Odessa, stressed that the war is directly linked to fossil fuel extraction and urged an end in public investment in oil and gas.

Saad Alfarargi, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, said the right to development is a holistic, multi-stakeholder process, and underlined the need to revise tax and finance policy to address the concerns of the most vulnerable, including women.

Denison Jayasooria, All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on SDGs, proposed the establishment of a 10-member panel under the auspices of ECOSOC on the status of civil society organization (CSO) engagement and participation.

Participants expressed concern over the diminishing space for civil society and political repression against CSOs in Belarus and Russia. They stressed the need to: improve education; end discrimination in the workplace and against older persons; improve economic transparency and revise fiscal regulations to curb tax evasion; and promote data collection and adopt data-driven solutions.

Delegates highlighted various efforts to include civil society in national and local SDG processes. They also noted the need to: address systemic barriers to equality such as sexism and misogyny; protect civic space and human rights defenders; combat disinformation; shift power to children, communities, and local organizations; and provide girls with high quality education and information on sexual and reproductive rights.

Voluntary National Reviews

Presenting Latvia’s second VNR, Anita Muižniece, Minister of Education and Science, noted that the country’s greatest challenge lies in reducing income inequality and addressing the gender pay gap. She highlighted progress in knowledge, skills and education (SDG 4); CSO and youth engagement (SDG 17); sustainable finance for biodiversity (SDG 15); and the transformative power of museums and libraries for sustainability and peace (SDG 16).

Presenting the Philippines’ third VNR, Enrique Austria Manalo, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, highlighted the country’s focus on innovation for sustainable development. He noted progress in addressing SDGs 14 (life below water) and 15, with an increase in protected areas in the ocean and on land but said the pandemic has caused a reversal on education. He also highlighted progress on private sector engagement.

Jacques Ducrest, State Secretary and Delegate, Federal Council for the 2030 Agenda, Switzerland, highlighted efforts to digitize and thus democratize the country’s VNR process. He noted the need for further progress on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) (SDG 12), especially related to energy consumption, and on addressing inequality (SDG 10), particularly related to the gender pay gap and migrants.

Marisol Merquel, President of the National Council for the Coordination of Social Policies, ARGENTINA, highlighted CSO engagement and strengthened healthcare system as a response to the pandemic, and reported on SDG alignment with national strategies to promote production and human well-being, and eradicate poverty. She highlighted redistribution of wealth and tackling inequality among remaining challenges.

George Gyan-Baffour, Chairman of the National Development Planning Commission, GHANA, reported on the country’s inclusive VNR preparation process and the recovery of school enrollment rates after pandemic restrictions were eased. He showcased the improvement of gender parity in schools and decision-making bodies, as well as efforts on deforestation and combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. He also stressed digitalization and strengthened partnerships as a way to ensure social inclusion and equality and improve data.

Addressing questions from GHANA, LIBERIA and the NGO MAJOR GROUP, Muižniece (Latvia) highlighted the country’s focus on good governance, quality education and climate; its establishment of a digital literacy policy to address setbacks in education during the pandemic; and its expansion of broadband access and literacy to address the national digital divide.

Responding to questions from GUATEMALA, PAKISTAN, SWITZERLAND, VIET NAM and the CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP, Manalo (the Philippines) pointed to innovations in transit infrastructure as well as forest monitoring; expansion of blended learning programmes; the launch of the

SDG Watch for online dissemination of the country's SDG indicators; and the promotion of a whole-of-government approach to achieving the SDGs.

Addressing questions from GHANA, FINLAND and the NGO MAJOR GROUP, Ducrest (Switzerland) noted the country's focus on addressing SCP, highlighted measures to address negative spill-over effects related to SCP through operationalizing OECD and EUROSTAT indicators, and shared the country's CSO engagement strategy.

Responding to questions from SPAIN and EL SALVADOR, Marisol Merquel, Argentina, noted the country's focus on local government involvement in the VNR process, highlighted measures to address food security for vulnerable groups including pregnant women, and drew attention to various public policy interventions and budgetary investments to meet the SDGs.

Gyan-Baffour (Ghana) responding to questions from NORWAY, DENMARK, LATVIA, NIGER, and CANADA, noted that Ghana's food production has not been affected by the global crisis, but food transportation has been hindered due to fuel price increases. He also highlighted national afforestation strategies that include planting over one million trees and investments in youth and entrepreneurship to create jobs.

Presenting The Gambia's second VNR, Fatou Kinteh, Minister for Gender, Children and Social Welfare, noted gains in the achievement of: SDG 4, including early childhood development and access to education centers; SDG 5, through the creation of her ministry; SDG 14, through the control of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, among others; and SDG 17, through an increase in remittances. She noted challenges in achieving SDG 15, related to forest cover loss.

Presenting Belarus's VNR, Irina Velichko, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that despite international sanctions, progress has been observed on SDG 4, including an increase in digital upskilling, and on SDG 5, with women involved in decision making. She noted the country is promoting the Baltic and Black seas' health (SDG 14); highlighted its rank in the top 10 most forested countries in Europe (SDG 15); and called for international cooperation (SDG 17) to ensure the non-politicization of SDG implementation.

Presenting the country's VNR, Sifiso Gabriel Mamba, Chief Economist, eSwatini, said challenges in achieving the SDGs include: the lack of resources for implementation, and data for annual reviews; declining official development assistance; a lack of private sector involvement; youth unemployment; and an absence of regional and constituency level SDG plans.

Responding to JAMAICA, the CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP, NIGERIA, and MOROCCO, Kinteh (The Gambia) highlighted youth empowerment initiatives that include free basic education, improved vocational training and access to financing. She stressed The Gambia's focus on the green economy and meeting Paris Agreement commitments.

Responding to the EU, the WOMEN'S GROUP, RUSSIAN FEDERATION, PHILIPPINES, AZERBAIJAN, and POLAND, Velichko (Belarus) drew attention to sanctions and the EU's "cancelling" Belarus in the international system. She stated the number of NGOs does not affect the quality of civil society and that NGOs were involved in VNR preparation, "some were happy, some not." She also noted a decrease in the number of professions banned for women and promotion of female entrepreneurship, with the large share of women in lower-paid sectors remaining a challenge.

Responding to ZIMBABWE and BOTSWANA, Mamba (eSwatini) stressed growing investment in education and youth entrepreneurial funds. He noted progress on gender equality, which includes a new law on domestic violence and sexual offences, shelters for victims, direct access to land for women, and their growing representation in parliament.

Presenting Greece's second VNR, Akis Skertsos, Minister of State Responsible for the Coordination of Government Policies, highlighted the journey Greece has made since 2010, having lost 26% of its GDP. He said the governance model adopted in 2019 involves robust monitoring, review, and evaluation of public

policies, and linked this to: reductions in income inequality and school drop-out rates, and increases in women's leadership and renewable energy deployment.

Presenting Mali's VNR Abdoulaye Diop, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, highlighted efforts to, *inter alia*: promote synergies to improve access to and quality of education; support gender equality including by addressing gender-based violence; and increase tax revenues through changes to international fund transfers.

Presenting United Arab Emirates' (UAE) second VNR, Abdulla Nasser Lootah, Director-General of the Prime Minister's Office and Vice Chairperson of the National Committee on SDGs, highlighted the UAE's investments in education and gender equality, its net-zero-emissions-by-2050 plan, and an innovative system for monitoring SDG progress, as well as multi-stakeholder involvement in SDG implementation.

In response to MOROCCO, BULGARIA, UK, the NGO MAJOR GROUP, LEBANON and ARMENIA, Skertsos (Greece) highlighted the country's national recovery and resilience plan and noted efforts to fast-track asylum-seeker applications and highlighted the country's small islands as sites for renewable energy generation.

Responding to UK, NIGER, GREECE, and the INDIGENOUS PEOPLES MAJOR GROUP, Diop (Mali) underlined the need for greater investment in health systems; noted the government's efforts to improve security; and underlined the importance of a human-rights based approach to achieving the SDGs.

In response to SINGAPORE, MALI, COSTA RICA, UK, and the CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP, Lootah (UAE) pointed to the expansion of digital schools for students with limited access to physical schools from outside the UAE; and to the country's incorporation of youth in decision making, including in advisory councils.

Presenting Eritrea's VNR, Sofia Tesfamariam, Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the UN, shared progress towards SDG 3 (health) and SDG 13 (climate action). She stressed that Eritrea has improved numerous health indicators, including life expectancy, infant mortality, proximity to healthcare facility, and vaccination rates. She reported on efforts to eliminate malaria and a successful COVID-19 response. She also highlighted a participatory afforestation campaign and transition to renewable energy, stressing that statistics and data remain a challenge.

Responding to SOUTH AFRICA, the ACADEMIA MAJOR GROUP, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, SENEGAL, TÜRKIYE, EGYPT, PAKISTAN, and INDIA, Tesfamariam said the VNR focused on two SDGs where Eritrea has achieved the most in order to limit its scope and provide more detail; and the successful COVID response was based on continued functioning of the economy and distribution of food and essential supplies to those in need. She also stressed that there is no development without peace and noted that sanctions have hampered financing and trade.

In the Corridors

With Major Groups celebrating their 30th anniversary at the UN, some noted it was only fitting that Tuesday morning's discussions shone a light on the role of civil society in delivering the 2030 Agenda. Observers noted that Major Groups continued to play a key role during the presentation of VNRs, asking hard-hitting questions no one else would: how could one country justify its status as a tax haven? How could another strengthen its protection of human rights? Would another answer for flagrant abuse of migrants in their jurisdiction? All of these questions showcased the vital watchdog function of civil society in holding governments to account in their implementation of the SDGs. Nonetheless, some noted this function is rife with challenges. For instance, a planned civil society action to emphasize the need to end "corporatization" of the 2030 Agenda was cancelled at the last-minute due to restrictions on protests at the venue. Several interventions also highlighted the prosecution and killing of human rights and environment defenders and shrinking civic spaces in many countries. Despite the challenges, Major Groups pledged to "press on" to ensure the rights of present and future generations.