

HLPF 2023 Highlights: Tuesday, 11 July 2023

Progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on clean water and sanitation is “alarmingly off-track.” Delegates were emphatic about not wasting any more time and turning the tide on implementation. “Let’s drop the egos and do collaboration for real,” was a strong message from the 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) on its second day. In addition to SDG 6, delegates discussed localization of action on the SDGs and the special challenges faced by small island developing states (SIDS).

SDG 6 and Interlinkages with Other SDGs – Clean Water and Sanitation

UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) President Lachezara Stoeva (Bulgaria) convened this session. Jaap Slootmaker, Vice Minister, Infrastructure and Water Management, the Netherlands, reported the UN 2023 Water Conference produced a concrete action agenda, one-fourth of which could be considered “game changing.” Daniel Eshetie, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), presented the highlights of the report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the SDGs, focusing on SDG 6.

Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, said the UN Regional Commissions emphasize: mainstreaming water resource management; enhancing climate resilience; promoting transboundary water cooperation; improving data collection and sharing; and diversifying finance.

Kelly Ann Naylor, lead writer, SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2023 on Water and Sanitation, said the report shows SDG 6 progress is “alarmingly off-track,” and provides a clear blueprint to accelerate progress.

Johannes Cullmann, Vice-Chair, UN-Water, moderated the panel. Maria Fernanda Espinosa, Commissioner, Global Commission on the Economics of Water, reported the Commission plans a follow-up report looking at water economics and instruments in a more granular way, with a view to releasing the report by the 2024 Summit of the Future.

Karin Gardes, Acting Executive Director, Stockholm International Water Institute, lamented the collective failure on this SDG and its absence from the upcoming SDG Summit agenda. She urged a shift in behavior and focus to cooperation, collaboration and coordination.

Joel Kolker, Water Global Lead for Finance, World Bank, remarked on the financial challenges in the water sector, noting many service providers are not creditworthy. He urged countries to improve service providers’ technical and financial viability and to evaluate governance, policies, institutions and regulatory environments for effective implementation.

Olga Djanaeva, Director, Rural Women’s Association ALGA, Kyrgyzstan, emphasized the urgency of addressing gender-related challenges under SDG 6. She called for increased resources for capacity building, knowledge sharing, and gender-disaggregated data.

Francis Koroma, youth representative and Founder, Francis Koroma Foundation, underscored the need to bridge the gap between SDG 6 and the other Goals and to integrate young people in these discussions. He noted his foundation’s work on using technology to address water scarcity issues.

Csaba Körösi, President, UN General Assembly, recalled the Water Conference and the understanding it generated that the water cycle is part of the global common goods. He outlined several “game changing” commitments and urged countries to take real action and not further postpone discussions on how to implement SDG 6.

In the ensuing general discussion, 41 speakers made presentations. Many commended the process and outcomes of the recent UN Water Conference and welcomed the appointment of a Special Envoy, stating it would raise the profile of water issues in the UN system. Some called for a UN system-wide water strategy, and launching a process towards a UN Water Convention.

Many contributions highlighted new initiatives that tackle water scarcity as well as water-related natural disasters and foster greater transparency and accountability in water resources governance at all levels. Speakers further underlined the critical need for finance, technology transfer, capacity building and other means of implementation, noting action on SDG 6 underpins many other Goals – including food security, gender equality, health and education, affordable housing, peace and security, and climate change adaptation.

Specific proposals regarding the global water agenda henceforth included calls for:

- establishing regional science and technology centers to strengthen knowledge sharing and a science-based approach to tackling water insecurity;
- strengthening the inclusion of local communities and authorities in multilateral processes; and
- adopting risk prevention paradigm with an emphasis on early-warning systems to avoid overwhelming damage from water-related hazards.

In concluding remarks by the panel, Espinosa emphasized that both the problems and solutions are well known, and what is needed are policy and governance innovations at multiple levels. Stating the discussions had highlighted the high cost of inaction, she urged all stakeholders to kickstart implementation of commitments launched at the UN Water Conference. Gardes cautioned against “naïve belief” in technological solutions, stressing the importance of an enabling environment to support emerging polycentric systems of water governance at all levels.

Transformation from the Ground Up: Acting at Local Level

ECOSOC Vice President Albert Ranganai Chimbindi (Zimbabwe) chaired this session. Mathieu Mori, Secretary General, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe, said local action is a precondition for delivering the promise of the SDGs and called for national governments to give local leaders the powers they need to do so.

The panel was moderated by Swedish journalist Lydia Capolicchio. Turan Hançerli, Mayor, Avcılar, Türkiye, urged equipping local officials with greater administrative powers to take initiatives, and to facilitate the sharing of experiences.

Robert Papa, Chief of Staff, Busia County, Kenya, said his government worked for local solutions, using resources at hand, to ensure no one is left behind. He emphasized not presenting the SDGs as a UN agenda, but rather as a local agenda that tackles day-to-day problems.

Rosario Diaz Garavito, Founder, Millennials Movement, Peru, explained her organization has trained Latin American youth to drive change on development in their local communities. She urged a more central role for the Voluntary Local Reports (VLRs) in the HLPF, and promotion of intergenerational solidarity.

Noting how Dalits have been left behind in many aspects, Bhakta Bishwakarma, General Secretary, Asia Dalit Rights Forum, Nepal, urged governments to “reach out to the unreached populations first” when implementing the SDGs. He described the community as “not idly standing by, but actively engaged.”

In the ensuing discussions, many countries shared lessons learned from local initiatives, including VLRs. The contribution of localized approaches to monitoring SDG progress by identifying and addressing gaps between on-the-ground situations and the Goals was highlighted, with one speaker stating that almost two-thirds of the SDG targets cannot be achieved without localized coordination and engagement.

Calls were made for: better resource sharing across governance levels and establishing multi-level dialogues within countries; demand-driven, context-specific investment that does not exacerbate conflict dynamics; and multilevel governance, strengthened local data systems and effective finance channeled to local levels.

Recalling that at HLPF 2022, delegates were concerned that “too few” of their countries’ citizens knew about the 2030 Agenda, Capolicchio asked the panelists how to demystify the SDGs and increase citizen engagement. Hançerli suggested adding focus to on-the-ground work to address local needs and capacities; Papa called for including people throughout planning processes and to build solutions that directly address their day-to-day problems; and Diaz Garavito stressed that the “people’s agenda” must be realized, through local actions, co-ownership, and inclusion of future generations.

Small Island Developing States: From Recovery to Resilience in the Face of Multiple Shocks

ECOSOC President Stoeva chaired this panel. Gaston Browne, Prime Minister, Antigua and Barbuda, and Co-Chair, High Level Panel of the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI), called for debt relief and grant-based finance for SIDS as the only possible solution for countries to achieve debt reduction and sustainability. He noted that despite political challenges in measuring vulnerability, it is a crucial step to ensure financing for SIDS.

Cristelle Pratt, Assistant Secretary-General, Environment and Climate Action, Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, moderated. She emphasized that resilience multidimensionality includes economic, social, environmental,

and governance aspects and urged against a siloed focus on economy.

Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, stressed SIDS are on the frontlines of a polycrisis and called for more finance for resilience, risk reduction and climate adaptation. She highlighted opportunities presented by the G20 Working Group on Disaster Risk Reduction established under India’s presidency and the SAMOA Pathway.

Amit Prothi, Director General, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, presented the concrete steps the Coalition takes to increase SIDS’ resilience and highlighted a successful first round of applications for capacity-building projects.

Ruth Kattumuri, Commonwealth Secretariat, called for concessional finance, adequate prioritization for SIDS in international financing, and for economic diversification at the local level.

Renee Atwell, Dean, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Youth Ambassador Corps, Trinidad and Tobago, called for investment in early warning and data collection systems; reform of the global financial architecture; and increased technical and financial support.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, stressed that digital transformation should be at the heart of resilience building, and called for the incorporation of climate adaptation and vulnerability in development strategies.

Krshtee Sukhbilas, Children and Youth Major Group, made a strong case for fully integrating young people, while accounting for SIDS’ capital needs and vulnerabilities, concluding that “we are not just some vacation or honeymoon destination.”

In subsequent debate, speakers highlighted the inherent vulnerabilities that SIDS face, with many welcoming ongoing work on the MVI that reflects SIDS’ realities. It was noted the region spends 18 times more in debt repayment than it accesses in climate finance and stressed that “more repackaging and roadmaps will not get us where we want to go.”

The international community was called upon to, among other things:

- support investments in early warning and early action systems, as well as related infrastructural development and training;
- expand access to affordable and climate-indexed financing tailored to SIDS contexts;
- take into account the specific vulnerabilities as well as the contributions of women and excluded groups;
- continue efforts to reform the international finance architecture through SIDS-led initiatives such as the MVI and the Bridgetown 2.0 initiative to reform international financial architecture;
- place capacity building for disaster risk reduction at the center of development cooperation; and
- tackle the high cost of data collection arising from SIDS’ geographic dispersal.

In The Corridors

As the glaring statistics of just how “alarmingly off-track” we are towards achieving SDG 6 rolled in, delegates could be forgiven for feeling like they were drowning in a sea of bad news. Noting lack of progress despite knowing what needs to be done and past pledges and commitments, one seasoned delegate pointed out that “it feels like we keep walking in circles” – which is exactly how SIDS delegates felt today about global financing for sustainability and building resilience. Without proper financing, SIDS – “gems in the ocean,” – are facing an existential threat, and what might be a loss of a honeymoon or vacation spot for some is a truly devastating loss of livelihoods and homes for others.