

## HLPF 2023 Highlights: Friday, 14 July 2023

Countries cannot fulfil the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) without engaging and collaborating with civil society. We are halfway to 2030, but still nowhere near achieving the SDGs, and doubling down on action is now critical. Those were the two main messages from the High-level Political Forum's (HLPF) morning consultation with Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGoS) on its fifth day. Over the rest of the day nine Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) were presented and discussed.

### *Perspectives from Major Groups and Other Stakeholders at the Mid-point of the SDGs: Towards Inclusive Transformation*

Lachezara Stoeva (Bulgaria), President, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), chaired this session. She emphasized that MGoS are “woven into the fabric” of the HLPF, and a concerted effort has been made by organizers to include MGoS in all HLPF debates, with a special effort for HLPF 2023 to include more youth voices.

Stressing that the SDGs cannot be achieved without the participation of civil society, Joan Carling, Executive Director, Indigenous Peoples Rights International, urged states to provide enabling environments and integrate mechanisms for citizen participation at local and national levels. Noting that we are halfway to 2030, “but still way behind,” she urged that “instead of lip service, it’s time to turn the pledges of leave no one behind into actions, actions, actions.”

Paola Simonetti, International Trade Union Confederation, said the convergence of global crises “is turning the concept of decent work into an illusion for the majority of workers.” She endorsed the Secretary-General’s idea of adopting a new social contract, suggesting elements such as ending all discrimination and guaranteeing universal social protection, and highlighted the importance of the World Social Summit in 2025.

Rashima Kwatra, Co-Chair, MGoS Coordination Mechanism, moderated the panel. Ali Jillani, Vice Chair, Asia Pacific Regional Civil Society Organization (CSO) Engagement Mechanism, said it is high time for the region to prioritize critical actions on the SDGs and to change business-as-usual by democratizing development policymaking. She called for development justice now.

Kofi Kankam, President and CEO, Elizka Relief Foundation, Africa Regional Mechanism for MGoS, noted that Africa’s progress in achieving the SDGs is an indicator on whether the commitment to leave no one behind is “rhetoric or reality,” urging accelerated economically-sound, socially inclusive and sustainable development efforts.

Bruno Ibarra, The Millennials Movement, and Latin America and Caribbean Focal Point for Children and Youth Major Group,

urged for collective, intergenerational action, and guaranteeing the human right to effective and meaningful participation for all.

The panelists lamented the loss of and threats to civic space, with Marianne Haslegrave, Director, Commonwealth Medical Trust, Economic Commission for Europe Regional Civil Society Mechanism, calling for its prioritized restoration. She underscored the resulting negative impacts on her region’s SDG progress and capacity for providing development assistance.

Stressing “refugees are not a monolith,” Mary Maker, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Goodwill Ambassador, expressed hope that future meetings include and spotlight more voices to represent the 110 million displaced people worldwide. She underscored refugees’ particular expertise and capacity to advise on solutions “when the world is on fire.”

Surya Deva, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, noted that time for “tweaks” has passed, and a fundamental, systemic shift must occur, including away from irresponsible business models. He highlighted the need for a planet-centered participatory development model.

In the ensuing discussion, delegates highlighted the importance of civil society engagement for combating inequality, and achieving sustainable lifestyles and production and consumption patterns. Some suggested including the contributions of CSOs in the content and process of developing VNRs, as well as national efforts to build multistakeholder partnerships, platforms, and dialogues. One delegate encouraged CSOs to keep leaders accountable for their words and pledges, noting his own commitment to listen and engage with them in the runup to the SDG Summit and beyond.

Many delegates concurred on the necessity of:

- a whole-of-society approach through concrete and practical means;
- removing systemic barriers for meaningful civil society inclusion;
- intergenerational initiatives; and
- upholding and restoring vibrant, active civic spaces.

Delegates also mentioned the need to:

- address racism and stop work-based discrimination faced by migrants and excluded communities such as: the Dalits, Roma, Rohingya, and Quilombola, among others;
- consider disabilities in earlier stages of infrastructure development, instead of retrofitting;
- provide financial and capacity-building support to develop solutions for aging populations;
- champion gender equality and inclusion of children and youth;
- promote privacy and digital accessibility;
- move beyond our current focus on GDP; and
- implement the polluter pays principle.

Education stakeholders stressed the importance of transformative and lifelong learning approaches as a precondition for all other Goals, noting these instill awareness and skills, alongside values for inclusive and sustainable development.

Business and industry stakeholders stressed the need to speed up the scale and pace of SDG action.

In final takeaways from the panel, Carling stressed that we have the means to achieve the SDGs, what is lacking is the political will to dismantle structural barriers. Simonetti reiterated her call for a new social contract, and the need to maintain momentum in preparation for the 2025 World Social Summit. Jillani reiterated the need for political will to tackle the financing gap for the 2030 Agenda, stating “let’s prioritize bread and books over bombs.” Kankam called for multilateral development partners to fulfil their commitments. Ibarra and Haslegrave urged governments to listen to and learn from civil society’s significant contributions.

### Voluntary National Reviews

**Morning Session: Panel 1:** In the morning four countries presented their second VNR. Presenting for Liechtenstein, Foreign Minister Dominique Hasler mentioned the development of 69 indicators linked to the SDGs, which suggest that 12 SDGs are moving toward sustainability with three showing negative trends. She noted that Liechtenstein recently made it mandatory for every government bill introduced to parliament to include an SDG analysis. She highlighted work on SDGs 4 (education) and 8 (work), as well as her country’s Education Strategy 2025+ and Climate Vision 2050. She noted the need to further improve SDG data and emphasized that her government places high priority on state and non-state collaboration on SDGs implementation.

Responding to SINGAPORE, COSTA RICA, and NGO MAJOR GROUP, Hasler highlighted the Finance Against Slavery and Trafficking flagship Target 8.7 initiative and its “follow the money” approach and banking services provided for slavery survivors as one of the private sector’s input for achieving SDGs. She also noted Liechtenstein’s national enabling environment that upholds the rule of law through a stable and inclusive political system integrating multistakeholder consultations on legislation related to SDGs and noted its cofacilitation of the UN General Assembly resolution on the rule of law among other efforts to uphold the principle internationally. She also reported on several national data collection and analysis mechanisms for SDGs, including on gender and environment, and noted growing public interest in such indices.

Presenting Bosnia and Herzegovina’s VNR, Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Josip Brkić reported that his country adopted its SDG Framework following its first VNR in 2019 and aligned key development policies with the Framework. He noted “headwinds” faced during the pandemic slowed its implementation, but said the government had initiated the SDG localization process in 2022 and stepped up efforts to engage the private sector, citizens, and academia, citing the launch of an online platform and e-consultation process to help prepare the second VNR. He explained that an SDG Financing Working Group recently offered recommendations that the government intends to implement later in 2023. He also noted his country’s participation in regional cooperation for exchanging SDG implementation experiences and lessons learned, particularly regarding how to overcome bottlenecks.

Responding to SWITZERLAND, SLOVAKIA, SWEDEN, and WOMEN MAJOR GROUP, Brkić highlighted the multilevel nature of the SDG Council to ensure vertical government coordination and reported on the questionnaire-based pilot project in eight local communities to ensure localized SDGs implementation. He praised the success story of a business sustainability pioneer award that promotes private sector participation in SDGs. Brkić noted progress on gender parity and expressed the need for an umbrella CSO organization.

Presenting Comoros’ VNR, Daniel Ali Bandar, Secretary General of the Government, underscored the participatory, inclusive processes used for this second VNR. He highlighted national progress on digitalization, the blue economy and leaving

no one behind, before reporting: expectations to surpass targets on potable water access before 2030 (SDG 6); full territorial electricity grid connection (SDG 7), noting progress and challenges in operationalizing renewable energies; improved transport infrastructure and increased participation of women and youth in advancing industrialization (SDG 9); progress and needs in leveraging resources for social housing (SDG 11); and on the Emerging Comoros Plan for 2030 in working towards revitalized partnerships (SDG 17).

Responding to questions from SAUDI ARABIA and the DOMINICAN REPUBLIC on the role of public-private partnerships, Bandar said Comoros had been particularly impacted by two global crises: COVID-19 and the conflict in Ukraine, which had relegated it from an emerging middle-income country. He outlined efforts to revitalize the economy through, *inter alia*: providing direct support to strategic businesses involved in social sectors; supporting the registration of more than 1,000 youth- and women-led businesses; and launching an integrated monitoring framework. He further highlighted investments in the water and forestry sectors. Regarding gender equality, he described Comoros as the only matriarchal Muslim country in the world, where women’s property rights are safeguarded even in the event of family break ups.

Presenting Zambia’s VNR, Lois Mulube, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance and National Planning, highlighted the government’s increased investment, through a new national development plan, in areas including renewable energies, healthcare, education, and gender equality. She noted Zambia’s recent debt restructuring, which has enabled increased progress in achieving the SDGs. She highlighted comprehensive social programmes improving accessible healthcare and gender equality, stressing that poverty and inequalities remain pressing challenges. She ceded the podium to Glenda Mulenga, Zambian CSOs, who urged the government to fully realize its commitment to leave no one behind and to focus on achieving the “low-hanging fruit” of the SDGs like the meaningful participation of youth and marginalized groups.

Responding to a question from TANZANIA on applying whole-of-society approaches, Mulube highlighted progress in popularizing the SDGs through strong and integrated planning, implementation, and monitoring structures at national and sub-national levels. She cited cluster advisory groups as examples of multistakeholder bodies that assemble different SDG sectors. On community-level engagement, Mulube noted volunteer programmes that aim to catalyze change and ensure accountability in disbursing social cash transfers and other development funds. Responding to FINLAND’s question on implementation of the education for all policy, she highlighted the introduction of quality-assurance mechanisms, while calling for additional support to expand infrastructure. Regarding natural resource mapping, she highlighted progress in developing integrated land-use assessments but noted continuing technical capacity challenges in the application of remote sensing and data analysis tools.

**Afternoon Session:** In the afternoon two more panels presented their second VNRs, the first with Barbados, Rwanda and Viet Nam, and the second group paring Burkina Faso and Cambodia.

**Panel 2:** Presenting Barbados’ VNR, Shantal Munro-Knight, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, underscored that 44.7% of the 95 SDG targets identified as most relevant to their national context have been met or are on track to being met by 2030, with the remaining showing fair progress. She underscored the multiplier effects of global crises on pre-existing challenges in SDG achievement and stressed that climate change is a “lived reality” for small island developing states.

Munro-Knight highlighted ongoing initiatives under a social partnership umbrella that rally all sectors and stakeholders, including a renewed national economic recovery plan; socially

integrative and innovative sustainable development models that center SDG alignment, indicating progress in increasing low- and middle-income households' resilience to climate-related shocks; and the Bridgetown Initiative, noting it enables climate-threatened developing countries to tackle such disasters without increasing their sovereign debt burden.

Responding to questions from MOROCCO, SWITZERLAND, SAINT LUCIA, CHILE, BRUNEI and the WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP, Munro-Knight reiterated the aim of the Bridgetown Initiative to mobilize climate financing without increasing indebtedness and overcome weaknesses in traditional adaptation finance, which often treats risk as a local issue. On civil society inclusion, she recognized the need to ensure policy coherence across all sectors, further highlighting work to enhance gender-responsive budgeting and address the needs of migrant workers.

Presenting Viet Nam's VNR, Nguyễn Chí Dũng, Minister of Planning and Investment, explained it was developed following an inclusive process, and entailed full integration of the SDGs in national roadmaps and strategies. Noting areas of progress include improved access to clean energy (SDG 7) and affordable housing (SDG 11), he stressed the need to implement multilevel, cross-cutting measures to develop modern, synchronous and climate-adaptive socioeconomic infrastructure.

Nguyễn further outlined Viet Nam's work to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion, particularly for ethnic minorities, and highlighted the prioritization of science, technology and innovation, financial structure reforms, and inclusive, comprehensive educational and vocational training systems. He stressed ongoing challenges include climate-shocks, systemic gender inequalities, and undernourishment of children in ethnic minorities. Nguyễn called on improving data availability, increased community resilience, and better partnerships to address the VNR's identified challenges.

Responding to CANADA, SWITZERLAND, GUYANA, LAO PDR, THAILAND, REPUBLIC OF KOREA, and GUATEMALA, Nguyễn noted the importance of the Just Energy Transition Partnership for achieving net zero by 2050 and ongoing work on its implementation that will also outline a strategy for financial resource mobilization. He urged commitment to mitigate the energy transition's social impacts through retraining workers and supporting affordable electricity prices for vulnerable groups. Nguyễn further highlighted: policies for stakeholder engagement and placing people at the center of decision-making as crucial for leaving no one behind; measures for education and housing support during COVID-19 pandemic; and the importance of data currently coming from four different sources - national statistics offices, UN system, private enterprises, and CSOs - with commitment to improve the current 80% confidence rate.

Presenting Rwanda's VNR, Claudine Uwera, Minister of State for Economic Planning, outlined the advances made by her country, including: life expectancy improvements from 49 to 69 years since 2000; swift action to ensure recovery from COVID-19, including social safety nets for the most vulnerable; establishing the Recovery Plan and Economic Recovery Fund; and transformation of the energy and digital sectors. She highlighted the "Made in Rwanda" industrial policy and construction of the first-ever vaccine production facility as key achievements.

Responding to MOROCCO, MEXICO, WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS MAJOR GROUP, GERMANY, SINGAPORE, the UK, and GUATEMALA, Uwera noted relief for households and refinancing for businesses, including the USD 300 million Economic Recovery Fund, as successful strategies to tackle COVID-19 consequences. She highlighted a green growth and climate resilience strategy and Nationally Determined Contributions as tools promoting climate finance eligibility; noted CSO consultations when developing VNRs; and stressed Rwanda's commitment to strengthening data management systems.

**Panel 3:** Presenting Burkina Faso's VNR, Aboubakar Nacanabo, Minister of Economy, Finance and Forecasting, outlined national development and stabilization actions, which aim to restore territorial integrity, improve governance, and work towards national reconciliation and social cohesion, in light of domestic terrorism afflicting Burkina Faso since 2015. He stressed peace as a main goal for achieving the SDGs, lamenting destroyed public infrastructure, closed education facilities, and reduced access to basic services as consequences of the ongoing security crisis. He acknowledged strides made in spite of this, including progress on SDGs 6 and 7, and called on the international community to strengthen partnerships and prioritize action for peace on the road to 2030.

Responding to MOROCCO, MALI, CHINA, and JAPAN, Ragnaghnewendé Olivia Rouamba, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Regional Cooperation (Burkina Faso), lamented the sharp increase in internally displaced peoples (IDPs) from 12,045 to 2.6 million since 2015, with 40% of the country now occupied by terrorist groups, and noted housing, first-aid policies, and supporting IDP-hosting communities to ensure social cohesion. She noted national electrification programmes to connect remote villages implemented with UN and bilateral partners. Nacanabo stressed the international community should equitably support states with security concerns, especially to enable diverting national resources from security to development and ensure climate-vulnerable communities and livelihoods do not become easy targets for terrorist groups.

Presenting Cambodia's VNR, Tuon Thavrak, Secretary of State, Ministry of Planning, highlighted on-track progress for over two-thirds of SDG indicators. He reported barriers to full SDG achievement include the volatility of global politics and economies, ongoing technological and trade wars, and the emerging digital divide.

Thavrak noted the need to strengthen demographic resilience for inclusive growth, alongside Cambodia's commitment to supporting citizens at all stages of life through better opportunities and training to realize their full and meaningful participation in national development strategies. He further highlighted Cambodia's strategic approach focuses on improving political stability and partnerships; strengthening public finance management reforms; and aligning public budgets and strategies with the SDGs.

Responding to questions from the PHILIPPINES, BRUNEI DARUSSALAM, INDONESIA, THAILAND and CAMBODIA CIVIL SOCIETY, Thavrak outlined various initiatives to create sustainable, inclusive and livable cities and communities, highlighting investments in urban housing, transport and environmental management, as well as inclusive governance processes. On financing, he noted his country has successfully attracted foreign direct investment in the manufacturing, agribusiness and renewable energy sectors. Regarding participation in the VNR process, Thavrak noted that civil society actors were closely involved at all stages, helping to enrich data and validate findings of the report. He expressed the government's commitment to information transparency and appealed to partners to help fill remaining data gaps for effective monitoring of the SDGs.

### *In The Corridors*

The first VNR day at HLPF 2023 has altered course for the dynamic of the interactions, bringing more direct engagement between presenters and the audience, something many have yearned for since the meeting commenced. "But did you notice," pointed out one delegate, "how few country delegates were in the audience during the MGoS session, and how many MGoS left the room once the VNR sessions started?" "We may be at half-time," remarked one CSO, "but if we are to have a shot at winning the game, we need a clear game plan and team leaders that make us feel like a real team — and give it our best, together."



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