

## HLPF 2023 Highlights: Tuesday, 18 July 2023

All regions are off-track to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, and 2023 may be the last chance to commit to accelerated action toward realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These were among messages from the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) and the Regional Forums on the seventh day of the 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

The HLPF's Ministerial Segment continued its general debate on building momentum to the September 2023 SDG Summit, while a parallel session considered the presentation and discussion of one first Voluntary National Review (VNR) and 10 second VNRs.

### Messages from the UN Environment Assembly

Leila Benali, Minister of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development, Morocco, and President, sixth session of UNEA, said the world is at a critical and unique juncture, perhaps the last chance to recommit and accelerate action in time to realize the 2030 Agenda and achieve the SDGs. She emphasized recovery from COVID-19 and repairing the planet "are two sides of the same coin." Benali underscored the importance of improving the science-policy interface and engaging with the private sector. She invited all to work with UNEA to achieve the SDGs, noting "nothing is more powerful than everyone rowing together in the same direction."

### Messages from the Regions

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and Coordinator, UN Regional Commissions, reported that SDGs progress is off-track in all regions. She urged accelerated implementation actions, and underscored peace, stability and resilience are preconditions for the Goals' progress, with sustainable financing and transformative actions essential to realizing the 2030 Agenda. Alisjahbana urged: investment for resilience, including in social protections, gender equality, and disaster resilience; investment in enhancing national statistical systems to provide reliable and timely data; and enhancing collaboration and partnerships.

Nudhara Yusuf, Facilitator, Global Governance Innovation Network, moderated the panel. Garama Saratou Rabiou Inoussa, Chair, Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, said the Forum recommended, *inter alia*:

- supporting and intensifying transformative initiatives such as the Great Green Wall and the Battery Minerals Value Chain Initiative;
- focusing on the most vulnerable and channeling resources to them;
- targeting resources to provide timely data;
- placing science, technology and innovation at the heart of international development efforts; and

- using VNRs as public accountability mechanisms.

Responding to audience questions, Inoussa said the region supported the UN Secretary-General's call for reforming the global financial architecture and the SDG Stimulus. She added the region is working on generating innovative financing from domestic sources such as natural capital and carbon credits.

Noting several challenges facing his region, Waed Abdullah Badhib, Chair, Arab Forum for Sustainable Development 2023, reported the Forum outlined strategies to support developing countries to sustainably manage debt and facilitate access to concessional credit, and stressed the need to address wasteful spending and corruption. He said the Forum also discussed the role of the private sector as a partner and the role of renewable energies in accelerating economic recovery.

Pagnathun Theng, Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, noted rising poverty and inequality across the region, underscoring countries' commitment to inclusive solutions for a sustainable recovery. Among thematic priorities, he stressed accelerating transformations of the energy, food system, and urban development sectors, strengthening social protection, and tackling rising indebtedness.

Responding to audience questions, Alisjahbana reiterated three priorities for Asia-Pacific: strengthening resilience for the most vulnerable; high-quality and timely data; and regional cooperation. On the potential of increased interregional collaboration, she highlighted joint programmes with the European Union touching on digital connectivity, trade, and financing for development. She also noted regional investments focusing on improved connectivity for landlocked developing countries, renewable energy, and information and communications technologies.

The two Co-Chairs of the 2023 Regional SDG Forum for the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Region, Milos Prica (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Markus Reubi (Switzerland), reported only 21 of 169 targets are on track in their region, 79 require accelerated action, while for 15 targets, current trends need to be reversed. Reubi presented the in-depth SDG reviews, highlighting commitments to: implement pledges made at the UN Water Conference (SDG 6); leverage digital solutions for energy efficiency and the renewable energy transition (SDG 7); strengthen enabling environments (SDGs 9 and 17); and accelerate disaster risk reduction and affordable housing (SDG 11).

Responding to audience questions, Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary, UNECE, said fostering transboundary cooperation among the region's 56 member states is "the bread and butter of our work." Among regional achievements, she highlighted the creation of 155 subsidiary expert bodies and advances in the digital and green economy sectors but stressed that leveraging support will require political will from countries.

Marisol Merquel, Chair, Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development, outlined overarching messages from the Forum, including the need to:

- address growing drought and water stress, pollution and climate change (SDG 6);
- maintain momentum on renewable energy (SDG 7);
- ensure people-centered approaches to infrastructural development, industrialization, and science and technology (SDG 9); and
- improve access to housing in the world's most urbanized region (SDG 11).

She concluded that at this midway point in the 2030 Agenda, countries are not at the halfway mark, and signaled renewed commitment to eradicating poverty as the most fundamental SDG challenge.

Responding to audience questions, Raúl García-Buchaca, Deputy Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, stressed that despite comprising middle-income countries, the region had not reached the halfway point in achieving its SDG targets. He called for acceleration of, among other targets, renewable energy and green economy, digitalization, sustainable tourism, social protection, and regional integration, highlighting a partnership with UN Women to place care at the center of COVID-19 recovery.

Representing Major Groups and Other Stakeholders, lead discussant Javier Surasky, Cepei, Argentina, expressed concern that while regions act as connectors between governance levels, and embody the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda, the HLPF process has not reflected this. He cautioned that overlooking the role of regions, “will break the implementation, monitoring, and governance chains we need to reinforce the SDGs.” He envisioned regions as political spaces in which countries can explore more impactful VNRs and create the right incentives to achieve the SDGs.

Summing up the discussion, Yusuf emphasized at this juncture of complex global crises, voices from regions, including civil society, provide “a collective glue” to achieve the 2030 Agenda. She welcomed the upcoming Summit of the Future as an opportunity for today's generation “to see the world that scores these goals.”

### **Voluntary National Reviews**

One country presented its first VNR, while 10 presented their second VNR.

**SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS:** Konris Maynard, Minister of Public Infrastructure, Energy and Utilities, Domestic Transport, Information, Communication and Technology and Posts, noted progress on SDG 6 and reported universal electricity access, renewable energy source capacity development, and efforts to connect both islands' electricity grids. He noted good progress on SDGs 9 and 11, highlighting increased infrastructural climate resilience. The presentation underscored the importance of mainstreaming the SDGs in national development planning frameworks and development of green, blue, and orange economies as keys for sustainable development.

Responding to questions from SAINT LUCIA, MOROCCO, SWITZERLAND, and CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP, Maynard highlighted regulatory and legislative reforms to ensure an accelerated and just transition towards renewable energy sources. Kevin Hope, Lead VNR Technical Consultant, noted progress in reducing poverty rates through social protection interventions, investment in access to basic services, and vocational training systems to increase youth employability; and Sherilita Dore-Tyson, Ministry of Sustainable Development, reported social inclusion strategies and transversal governmental policies focusing on reducing inequality and supporting marginalized groups. Auren Manners, Ministry of Sustainable Development, noted challenges from unavailable statistical data. Nekirah Nicholls, Youth Ambassador, highlighted youth inclusion initiatives and encouraged increased action to address digitalization and improved opportunities, including for creative sectors.

**BAHRAIN:** Noor Al-Khulaif, Minister of Sustainable Development, noted the strong focus on an inclusive and sustainability recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, including a USD 12 billion stimulus to stabilize the labor market. She identified priority targets including:

- access to water for all and improving water use efficiency;
- reducing dependence on fossil fuels;
- digitalization of public services and vital economic sectors;
- expanding access to affordable housing through public-private partnerships; and
- a commitment to multilateral partnerships for the SDGs.

Responding to questions and comments from JORDAN, SINGAPORE, RWANDA, UN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA, SAINT LUCIA and the NGO MAJOR GROUP, Al-Khulaif noted the strong focus on economic diversification, with the oil sector currently accounting for only 15% of the economy. On human capital development, she reported more than 20,000 jobs were created in 2022, exceeding the target, with continued efforts to reduce the gap between skills and market demand. Regarding SDG 11, Amena bint Ahmed Al-Rumaihi, Minister of Housing, highlighted a USD 1.6 billion fund to expand affordable housing.

**BELGIUM:** Yannis Debali, Office of the Belgian Minister of Climate, Environment, Sustainable Development and Green Deal, reported that sustainable development has been enshrined in the national constitution since 2007, and all regions and stakeholders were involved in preparing the VNR. He highlighted significant progress on Goals 2, 6 and 8 (zero hunger, water, decent work). Debali emphasized the importance of future-proof development strategies that also address current needs, including for basic service accessibility, and of focusing on the most vulnerable groups to ensure a just transition. He urged embedding full-fledged SDG governance through a systemic, coherent approach, with a vision beyond the next political term elections.

Responding to questions from the DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO, CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP, MALDIVES, DENMARK, and SOUTH AFRICA, Debali outlined programmes underway with partner countries that support vulnerable agricultural communities and tackle environmental degradation, and noted Belgium increased its contribution to international climate financing efforts. Debali detailed federal-level development plans based on the SDGs; regulatory assessments to further integrate them; and initiatives to engage all ministers on the 2030 Agenda, to integrate climate and sustainable development in education, and to ensure the just transition is at the heart of federal policies.

**CROATIA:** Nikolina Brnjac, Minister for Tourism and Sport, reported on alignment of national policies and strategic plans. She outlined good progress in 14 SDGs, stagnation in one, and low progress for two, and noted national priority areas include digitalization, demographic renewal, and the green transition. Addressing challenges, Brnjac noted SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13 (climate), 14 and 15 (life below water and on land) as Goals requiring further progress and targeted investment and implementation. She also outlined the inclusive and multisectoral approach in developing the VNR and underscored institutional infrastructure facilitating civil society and stakeholder collaboration.

In response to questions posed by CUBA, SPAIN, MOROCCO, UNECE REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM, and INDIA, Brnjac noted:

- short-term official development aid (ODA) and long-term cooperation as foundations to sustainable partnerships that foster knowledge sharing;
- a national development strategy supporting the green transition, alongside two umbrella climate strategies, to reduce emissions and bolster resilience;



- a national youth programme and initiatives improving education quality and access, and financial mechanisms to facilitate youth employment;
- commitment to civil society organization (CSO) and private sector inclusion; and
- strategies to ensure the tourism sector contributes to the 2030 Agenda.

**TANZANIA:** In a video message, Mwigulu Nchemba, Minister of Finance and Planning, highlighted the strong multistakeholder approach at all levels. He noted significant progress on SDGs 6 and 7, with over 70% of the population having access to water, and nearly 80% with access to clean energy, while calling for access to financing, trade, and technology support. Reynald Maeda, Co-Convener, Tanzania Sustainable Development Forum, commended the government for its meaningful engagement with thousands of civil society representatives under the auspices of the National SDG Coordination Framework.

Responding to comments and questions from ICELAND, ZAMBIA, NORWAY, WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP, UN ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA, and MOZAMBIQUE, Anthony Damian Sanga, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements, said the country undertook its VNR in a participatory and "whole of society" approach. On energy access, he highlighted efforts to boost the use of renewable resources and clean cooking, adding over 10,000 villages have access to electricity. He noted efforts to ensure gender equity in the management of energy projects, notably through enabling women's groups to supply goods and services to energy sector.

**BRUNEI:** Haji Mohd Amin Liew Abdullah, Minister at the Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister of Finance and Economy, highlighted: mainstreaming the SDGs in the national development plan, Wawasan Brunei 2035; enhancements in institutional arrangements; improvements in evidence-based monitoring and timely reporting of progress; and whole-of-nation partnerships. He noted steady progress on Goals 7 and 9, good progress in most others and regression in Goal 12 (sustainable production and consumption). "We still have catching up to do," he said, but Brunei has identified priorities for accelerated actions.

Responding to KUWAIT, INDONESIA, BARBADOS, VIET NAM, TIMOR-LESTE, and THAILAND, Amin stressed continuing improvement in Brunei's "SDG ecosystem," including the National Coordinating Committee, and the whole-of-society approach it is implementing. He emphasized Brunei is continuing action for the SDGs and is committed to key steps and urgent follow-up. On education, he noted the Education Ministry has a post-COVID-19 recovery strategy. On net zero by 2050, he noted the national climate policy with 10 strategies, eight of which have already exceeded targets. On dementia, he noted the need to work with others to develop a roadmap for healthy aging.

**ICELAND:** Eggert Benedikt Gudmundsson, Special Envoy for Sustainable Development, alongside Rebekka Karlsdóttir, Youth Delegate, and Vala Karen Viðarsdóttir, Representative, UN Association of Iceland, noted the VNR's development in close collaboration with all members of society, outlining the CSO-led assessment report on Iceland's progress on the SDGs, which reports insufficient progress, particularly on SDG 13 (climate action) and inadequate meaningful inclusion of youth; development of a national strategy on sustainable development; and the need to use measures other than GDP to measure progress.

Responded to questions from NORWAY, UNECE REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM, and TANZANIA, Gudmundsson noted the independent CSO report is a tool for new strategic policy developments and highlighted a study on negative spillover effects of unsustainable consumption and production patterns. He also outlined work to meaningfully integrate stakeholder voices through the inclusively designed sustainability council. Gudmundsson then detailed strategies to support the transport sector's renewable energy transition,

including using a range of energy sources while centering energy efficiency; said that in light of Iceland's small population size, disaggregating data further by demographic could affect individuals' right to privacy; and concluded with a limerick reiterating Iceland's commitment to inclusion and SDG achievement.

**TIMOR-LESTE:** Karlito Nunes, Permanent Representative to the UN, alongside José de Jesus, representing youth, Bella Galhos, representing LGBTI persons, and Cesario da Silva, representing persons with disabilities, highlighted Timor-Leste's objective to place people at the core of work on the SDGs and turn challenges into opportunities, reporting:

- initiatives to increase school enrolment, a federal programme to provide meals for schoolchildren, and youth employment schemes;
- sustainable development plans to diversify the economy and alternative financial strategies, including using foreign direct investment to expand the green and blue economies;
- the need for judicial system reform to further ensure meaningful inclusion of LGBTI persons and persons with disabilities; and
- the need for concrete implementation mechanisms and improved collection and analysis of disaggregated data.

Responding to questions posed by AUSTRALIA, INDONESIA, PORTUGAL, NEPAL, BRUNEI, THAILAND, NGO MAJOR GROUP, and the UK, Nunes underscored main lessons learned from COVID-19 being a multisectoral rapid response using a clear, unified communications strategy and high-quality data for decision-making. He outlined priority areas for the Human Capital Development Fund, including mitigating malnutrition in children under the age of five; work on policy coherence, judicial sector capacity building and access. He also highlighted LDC-specific challenges, calling for using a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index and global financial structural reforms to increase SDG funding.

**FRANCE:** Nicolas de Rivière, Permanent Representative to the UN, described the multistakeholder approach taken to develop the roadmap to 2030, saying it covers six cross-cutting thematic streams. Among SDG achievements to date, he highlighted: increased gender equality in the workplace, increased renewable energy production; boosting organic agriculture alongside food security; creating a national council on climate challenges that received over 300,000 submissions; and raising ODA contributions by more than 50% since 2017. Among multilateral initiatives, he highlighted alignment with the EU's "Fit for 55 in 2030" decarbonization strategy, spearheading the global financing pact for a fair climate transition, and raising the proportion of ODA funding channeled through civil society.

Responding to MOROCCO, PALAU, COTE D'IVOIRE, and CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP, Rivière highlighted the recent completion of France's new environmental planning policies to achieve carbon neutrality, including a 10% reduction of energy consumption in two years and lowering emissions by 5% compared to 2019 levels, and close alignment to biodiversity protection and other environmental targets. Stressing the EUR 15 billion commitments to ODA are not enough to resolve structural global inequities, he looked forward to implementing outcomes of the Paris Summit for a new global financing pact for the SDGs.

**LITHUANIA:** Simonas Gentvilas, Minister of Environment, highlighted greater integration of the SDGs into national planning, including through an open data monitoring portal. Despite heightened geopolitical tensions, he noted significant advances in fighting poverty, gender equity, and energy security, and meeting Lithuania's ODA commitments. He further noted incentives for equitable access to education, leadership in digitalization and science, technology and innovation, and decoupling carbon emissions from economic growth through "one of the most ambitious carbon taxes in region." Kęstutis Kupšys, Vice President, Lithuanian Consumers Alliance, representing NGOs,

commended the inclusive VNR preparation process, but urged prioritization of monitoring and policy coherence, also noting continuing human rights challenges in the treatment of migrants and non-recognition of same sex relationships.

Responding to IRELAND, NGO MAJOR GROUP, JAPAN, BELARUS and BAHAMAS, Genvilas reiterated the “open and transparent” VNR process, entailing eight rounds of consultations, and diverse multi-actor and multi-level summits. On responses to the triple planetary crisis, he highlighted Lithuania’s circular economy policy, citing a deposit refund system enabling collection of more than 90% of recyclable packaging. Previewing Lithuania’s participation at the 2025 “Designing Future Society for Our Lives” Expo in Osaka, Japan, he said the country would showcase its advances in the life sciences sector.

**SINGAPORE:** Grace Fu, Minister for Sustainability and the Environment, highlighted progress since the country’s first VNR in 2018, including:

- the launch of a whole-of-nation blueprint with ambitious targets for net zero by 2050;
- attaining universal access to clean and sustainable water; enhanced energy efficiency and a six-fold increase in renewable energy;
- contributions to multilateral programmes and development assistance;
- scaling up green financing and low carbon solutions, including innovations in carbon capture and storage; and
- adopting a broad-based carbon tax covering 80% of high emission sectors.

Among lessons from the COVID-19 crisis, she highlighted new legislation to reduce women’s care burden and ensure workplace fairness. Farah Hidayati Sanwari, Head of Partnerships of SpudnikLab, and Co-Founder, FiTree, reported strong youth engagement through National Youth Circles, enabling them to express their concerns and aspirations across many sustainability sectors.

Responding to the MALDIVES, LIECHTENSTEIN, SURINAME, INDONESIA, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, KENYA, and the ASIA PACIFIC REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM, Fu said the process to prepare the green energy plan integrates multiple SDGs and demonstrates the diverse stages involved, including mobilization and engagement, consultation, cocreation and co-ownership of outcomes. Among examples of how they balance tradeoffs, she highlighted water recycling regulations, or requiring businesses to internalize environmental costs by paying for water treatment or substituting green spaces following construction projects.

### ***Building Momentum Towards the SDG Summit***

On Tuesday afternoon, the general debate featured 39 statements, including seven ministers. In addition to describing national and local progress on the SDGs, many noted the setbacks they face due to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, conflict, and debt.

Bulgaria, on behalf of the 71 members of the GROUP OF FRIENDS OF CHILDREN, called for strategies that mobilize public, private and international resources for children, promote SDG awareness among children and youth, and put children’s rights at the center of the SDGs.

CABO VERDE, NEPAL, BANGLADESH, GHANA, and MADAGASCAR noted improved access to drinking water, sanitation, and electricity. The NETHERLANDS said safeguarding water is a defining challenge of our time and if we fail on water, we fail on all SDGs.

YEMEN, MOLDOVA and MALI described the effects conflict has had on SDG implementation. BELARUS said sustainable development is only possible where sustainable peace has been established.

On creating an enabling environment, POLAND and SOUTH SUDAN called for mobilization of both public and private resources, technology, and know-how from all of society. SERBIA stressed the role of science, technology and innovation. CAMBODIA discussed fostering the digital transformation; SWITZERLAND noted the importance of reliable and accurate data. DOMINICAN REPUBLIC called for crackdowns on corruption. MEXICO stressed job creation.

KUWAIT called for more public-private partnerships. MALAYSIA and MADAGASCAR said strong partnerships across society are important. KYRGYZSTAN stressed the importance of international cooperation, and the RUSSIAN FEDERATION described the role of the Eurasian Economic Union in achieving the SDGs.

On finance, DENMARK and the US said to close the finance gap, we must look beyond domestic resources and ODA towards private, blended, and innovative finance. SPAIN committed to mobilizing additional resources. NEPAL and ZAMBIA called for reform of the international financial architecture. RWANDA expressed concern about slow economic growth.

CABO VERDE, NAMIBIA, NEPAL, SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS, PHILIPPINES, and KENYA called for attention to middle income countries, as well as LDCs and SIDS, with regard to development finance, climate finance, and the high cost of debt.

NAMIBIA, ICELAND, NEPAL, KENYA, among others, stressed securing a low-carbon future and committed to achieving net zero emissions. DENMARK and the UNITED ARAB EMIRATES said climate action and sustainable development are inseparably linked.

ITALY called attention to the upcoming 2023 UN Food Systems Stocktaking Moment in Rome. ARGENTINA called for addressing worsening food insecurity.

SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS and the DOMINICAN REPUBLIC committed to gender equity, workers’ rights, and advancing opportunities for young people. COLOMBIA called for closing the gender gap and ensuring LGBTQ rights. A youth delegate from the NETHERLANDS called for intergenerational solidarity. ZAMBIA described empowering local communities. SWITZERLAND noted the role of cities in implementing the SDGs.

DENMARK called for the SDG Summit to commit to the 2030 Agenda in actions not words. PORTUGAL said the Summit should be a turning point that restores trust, galvanizes leadership, and adopts a forward-looking declaration. CHILE called for a renewed commitment to the SDGs and multilateralism. SAUDI ARABIA said it is time for bold, transformative, and collaborative steps that can create “a world that future generations deserve to inherit.” The PHILIPPINES said, “We knew the agenda had lofty ideas and we committed to this journey. We have not failed. The deadline is still ahead.”

### ***In the Corridors***

As calls for centering people in actions to implement the SDGs continue to resound within plenary walls, the diversity of parallel conversations happening throughout the UN Headquarters reinforce just how human these processes are — efforts by people, for people. From silently mouthing their interventions before taking the floor, to catching one another at lunch to exchange tips and news, delegates are racing towards a meaningful sustainable outcome to this HLPF. Fittingly, for this Nelson Mandela Day, day seven of HLPF heard civil society’s voices. The Women’s Major Group stood together in solidarity and civil society and youth delegates challenged some claims made by VNR presenters, demanding greater accountability in government reporting. Certainly a feeling of people trying to leave their mark.

The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* summary and analysis of HLPF 2023 will be available on Saturday, 22 July 2023 at [enb.iisd.org/high-level-political-forum-hlpf-2023](https://enb.iisd.org/high-level-political-forum-hlpf-2023)