

HLPF 2024 Highlights: Friday, 12 July 2024

Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGoS), comprising representatives of 21 autonomous and self-organized stakeholder groups and civil society networks, took center stage as the High-level Panel on Sustainable Development (HLPF) resumed on Friday. This ever-expanding constituency – after the first UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – was broadly acknowledged by countries during an opening segment devoted to exploring their evolving role as key agents of transformative change, partnership, and public accountability around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This critical and ongoing role of MGoS remained a central theme for the rest of the day as delegates listened to the first 10 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of this year's HLPF session. These reviews are a key peer reporting and implementation mechanism of the 2030 Agenda, often underlining the dynamic progress – as well as the challenges – that accompany local, national, and regional narratives, iterations, and approaches around the SDGs.

Perspectives from major groups and other stakeholders: Partnerships for transformative and urgent actions

Paula Narváez, President, UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), introduced this segment. She noted that [UN General Assembly resolution 67/290](#) on the organization of the HLPF ensures the rights of civil society organizations (CSOs) to participate and make submissions, and called on the Summit of the Future to support their meaningful participation

Oliver Henman, Co-Chair, MGoS Coordination Mechanism, recalled his work as a child in Brazil and noted that he did not expect to be “campaigning for the integration of social and ecological objectives 30 years later.” Maritza Chan-Valverde, Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to the UN, concurred, recalling that the UN Charter’s reference to “we the peoples,” is a reminder that the UN is not exclusively an organization of states. She described several initiatives promoting enhanced civil society inclusion, notably the #UNMute initiative, and the creation of a civil society action day and a Special Envoy to ensure “more seats at the table.”

Frances Zainoeddin, UN Focal Point, Stakeholder Group on Ageing, drew a distinction between attendance and meaningful participation, recalling that some civil society colleagues had struggled and given their lives for recognition and visibility. Jordania Urena, Deputy General-Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation, underlined the role of trade unions in advocating for: decent wages; universal social protection; and the safety of informal laborers.

Paul Divakar, Founder, the Inclusivity Project, urged continued focus on institutionalized forms of discrimination and solidarity with migrants, modern slave communities, and others that still fall through the cracks. Rey Asis, Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, highlighted the role of the Asia-Pacific Regional CSO Mechanism (APRCM), in preparing civil society spotlight reports, driving localization of the SDGs, and illuminating peoples’ SDG actions and solutions. He noted the challenges of language, digital, and other divides.

Caroline Rucuh, Executive Director, Western Kenya LBQT Feminist Forum, described the resilience of LGBTI+ networks in Kenya as “a beacon of hope,” through their use of strategic legalization and ethical research to fight entrenched discrimination against intersex individuals. Amina Bouayach, Secretary of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, noted that – at this halfway point on the path to 2030 Agenda implementation – the most challenging work still lies ahead.

A number of delegates, including DENMARK, TANZANIA, CHILE, SPAIN, INDIA, the RUSSIAN FEDERATION, and the MAJOR GROUP OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs), emphasized the importance of civil society’s role in meaningful engagement, participation, and collaboration on policy development, implementation, and holding governments accountable. NORWAY underlined MGoS’ self-organizing approach at a time of shrinking civic space, and the ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE (ECE) REGIONAL CSO ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM encouraged their role in peacebuilding and safeguarding freedom of expression.

In general discussions, FINLAND stressed that multistakeholder cooperation and participation are cornerstones of the SDGs, and emphasized the need to empower young people as important catalysts of change. FRANCE noted the role of the UN Global Compact in linking private, public, and civil society actors at a time of societal fragmentation. The OFFICE OF THE UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS stressed the need for a reprisal-free environment to allow civil society to safely voice their views and the INDIGENOUS PEOPLES MAJOR GROUP warned against tokenistic approaches to engagement.

The UK pointed to joint efforts with Costa Rica to drive reforms for more inclusive and transparent engagement within the processes of the UN Committee on NGOs. The WOMEN’S MAJOR GROUP expressed a preference for existing mandated MGoS engagement mechanisms over the creation of non-transparent formulations.

AZERBAIJAN and the BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY MAJOR GROUP underlined the diversity of MGoS, and BRAZIL reported on initiatives to combat structural racism and inequality. The APRCEM decried the exponential rise in global military spending, currently estimated at around USD 2.44 trillion in 2023, in a world

where half the population is denied basic human rights, stressing there is “no more room for this profligacy.”

SWITZERLAND, MOROCCO, and the PHILIPPINES described their approaches to engagement, including whole-of-society methods, participatory policy development, and high-level youth engagement. The CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP highlighted co-leadership and co-design approaches as other forms of youth engagement.

Closing the session, Chair Narváez underlined that “diversity is our strength, rather than our weakness.”

Voluntary National Reviews

The first ten countries presenting their VNRs on Friday were Palau, Belize, Mauritania, Eritrea, and Syria, who presented their second VNRs, with Georgia, Kenya, Chad, Zimbabwe, and Samoa presenting their third VNRs. The VNR presentations were chaired by Kairat Umarov, ECOSOC Vice-President (Kazakhstan), and Bob Rae, ECOSOC Vice-President (Canada).

GEORGIA: Lasha Darsalia, First Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Georgia, noted his country’s third VNR focuses on economic development, social inclusion, human capital development, and democratic governance. Noting Georgia has incorporated all the SDGs in its development policy, he described efforts to localize the SDGs, improve access to education and development of human capital, and support vulnerable groups through targeted social programmes.

Discussion: Delegates from FIJI, POLAND, the ECE REGIONAL CSO ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM, and the RUSSIAN FEDERATION sought clarification on various elements of the country’s VNR. Responding, Darsalia emphasized that ongoing Russian Federation control of Georgian territories has hindered his country’s full implementation of the SDGs. He outlined a national strategy to guide policy planning and connect indicators on the SDGs to budgetary processes; and highlighted housing and education programmes to support internally displaced persons and Ukrainian refugees.

KENYA: Following an introductory message by Njambi Kinyungu, Permanent Representative of Kenya to the UN, Monica Asuna, Director of Planning, National Treasury, Kenya, presented an overview of Kenya’s third VNR. Noting mixed SDG performance since COVID-19, as well as persistent food insecurity, Asuna said the report focuses on the institutional and policy response measures, notably:

- aligning county-level planning processes to the national and global SDG agendas;
- introducing a range of social protection measures such as affirmative funds for women, youth, the informal sector, and other marginalized groups; and
- implementing climate mitigation efforts, including a national programme to plant 15 billion trees by 2032.

Discussion: Responding to interventions from NORWAY, DENMARK, FINLAND, the NGO MAJOR GROUP, and GHANA, Asuna said the self-organized stakeholder platform, Kenya SDG Forum, has supported the government in convening dialogues, including for the current VNR. On targeted initiatives for those left behind, she highlighted: the Equalization Fund to bridge gaps in basic services in marginalized areas; and allocating 30% of all government procurement at national and county levels for women, youth, and persons with disabilities. On persistent food insecurity, Asuna cited the prioritization of agriculture and school feeding programmes in the bottom-up economic transformation agenda.

PALAU: Gaafar Uherbelau, Minister of Health and Human Services, Palau, said his country’s second VNR: is organized around the five pillars of culture, people, economy, environment, and partnerships; and incorporates 115 targets, 30% of which are on track to be achieved by 2030.

Uherbelau described initiatives to promote the wellbeing of the Palauan people, highlighting:

- online learning centers in rural schools which are particularly valuable for students with disabilities in outlying communities;
- plans for a new national hospital; and
- sustainable management of 100% of Palau’s marine and 20% of its terrestrial areas.

Following the minister’s presentation, Dee Raya Antonio, youth leader from Palau, acknowledged the youth’s lack of experience and need for guidance from their elders, but urged for securing youth’s voices in their home and communities.

Discussion: Delegates from NORWAY, INDONESIA, BELIZE, MICRONESIA, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES MAJOR GROUP, and FIJI posed follow-up questions on the VNR. Responding, Uherbelau pointed to both visible impacts of climate change on his country and indirect effects on sectors such as health. He outlined: support received from China and Taiwan for healthcare assistance; and a whole-of-government and -society approach to preparing the VNR. Antonio outlined the struggles of youth in Palau to preserve their cultural heritage in the face of globalization, climate change, and migration. CHINA requested that delegates abide by UN General Assembly resolution 2758 when referring to Taiwan.

BELIZE: Orlando Habet, Minister of Sustainable Development and Climate Change, Belize, said the 2024 VNR was a comprehensive effort that reviewed 85 SDG indicators in collaboration with the national statistics body and diverse stakeholders, including civil society. Among key results, he noted a sharp fall in unemployment; the launch of a programme to restore nearly 6% of the country’s deforested land; and improvements in digitalization and data-driven decision making. Noting that tackling accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss is beyond their capacity as a small island developing state (SIDS), he called for the international community to fulfil climate financing and other pledges. He further identified gender-based violence as a key concern.

Discussion: Habet responded to questions from SINGAPORE, PALAU, SURINAME, the UK, and the NGO MAJOR GROUP. He noted significant strides made to address sustainable development challenges through partnerships, singling out support from China and Taiwan to this end. Elaborating on the role of the Private Sector Investment Programme, he acknowledged a bias towards infrastructural projects, noting the need to explore how to shift funding to social and environmental sectors. On inclusion of marginalized groups, he highlighted the establishment of a free prior and informed consent protocol covering Maya customary rights, as well as recognition of LGBTI+ rights. CHINA requested that delegates abide by UN General Assembly resolution 2758 when referring to Taiwan.

CHAD: Fatima Haram Acyl, Delegated Minister in charge of the Economy and Planning, Chad, highlighted efforts made towards SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and SDG 1 (eradicating poverty), despite challenges presented by conflict, COVID-19, and climate change. She reported the entry into force of a new constitution in September 2023 following a series of national dialogues, noting it has led to: increased non-oil revenue; improved taxation and public finance reforms; and increased government-NGO partnerships to support vulnerable groups, including refugees. Haram Acyl further noted the elaboration of a

national development plan 2025-2030, which will be aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

Discussion: Responding to questions from MAURITANIA, BURUNDI, and the NGO MAJOR GROUP, Haram Acyl noted that the national development plan will aim to be inclusive and accessible, notably by ensuring consultation and representation from all regions and civil society groups during its elaboration. She further pointed to discussions with Chad's international technical and financial partners, including the International Monetary Fund, to finance the development plan.

MAURITANIA: Abdessalam Ould Mohamed Saleh, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, Mauritania, highlighted progress on: addressing climate change and poverty in a cohesive manner; increasing renewable energy investments; integrating internally-displaced persons and refugees; and combating terrorism. He called for a significant increase in international financing to support the country's SDG aspirations.

Discussion: Responding to questions from MOROCCO, CHAD, the EU, UGANDA, COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT, and UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Saleh stressed that social cohesion is a key priority for the government, further asserting "there is no single political prisoner in Mauritania today." He pointed to a doubling of social expenditure, contributing to the eradication of poverty, noting refugees are fully integrated in provision of health, education, and other basic services.

ZIMBABWE: July Moyo, Minister of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare, Zimbabwe, introduced his country's third VNR, highlighting Zimbabwe's vision of becoming an upper middle-income country by 2030. He noted that voluntary local reviews (VLRs) and a children-led VNR had increased the participation of multiple stakeholders in this VNR process. Moyo outlined increases in food security, life expectancy, and primary school completion rates; highlighted green energy initiatives to promote solar and hydropower energy sources; and reported the establishment of a national adaptation plan with strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. He noted persistent challenges in increasing participation and accessibility for people with disabilities.

Discussion: Following questions from AUSTRIA, UGANDA, SWITZERLAND, and TOGETHER 2030, Moyo noted that incorporating VLRs in the VNR process required awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts. He further elaborated how Zimbabwe has localized the SDGs through authority and budget decentralization, and outlined strategies to increase crop self-sufficiency and integrate informal sectors into the economy.

ERITREA: Sophia Tasfamariam, Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the UN, presented her country's second VNR, stating it focuses on SDGs 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), and 6 (clean water and sanitation). Among notable areas of progress, she highlighted:

- free education from primary to tertiary levels, with hundreds of new schools and libraries constructed;
- adoption of progressive and affirmative action measures to enhance women's rights, and reduction of harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation; and
- increased access to safe drinking water in rural and urban areas and certification of 93% of villages nationwide as open defecation free.

Discussion: Subsequently, delegates from NEPAL, the AFRICA REGIONAL CSO ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM, BURUNDI, OMAN, IRAN, and MALI sought further clarification on the VNR process. Responding, Tasfamariam underlined social capital as her country's most valuable and important driver of progress, noting the efforts and sacrifices of all Eritreans. Regarding her country's

progress despite the imposition of unilateral coercive measures, Tasfamariam stressed collective efforts by Eritreans, as well as increased investment in sectors such as mining, agriculture, and fishing. She also identified challenges faced during the VNR process including shortcomings in data collection and lack of disaggregated data.

SAMOA: Fatumanava-o-Upolu III Dr Pa'olelei Luteru, Permanent Representative of Samoa to the UN, described improved data collection, a strengthened social protection framework, and context-sensitive SDG priority setting as highlights of the VNR process. He noted three valuable lessons learned: adopting an integrated approach to the 2030 Agenda is a prerequisite for meeting economic, social, and environmental goals pursued in a balanced way; a whole-of-society approach strengthens ownership in the SDGs; and there is potential to draw on traditional knowledge – such as storytelling – to fill gaps in SDG monitoring data.

Discussion: Luteru responded to questions from INDONESIA, IRELAND, CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP and FIJI. On inclusion, he said the VNR process has evolved from "procedural engagement to more participatory engagement." He further noted significant progress in improving data gaps and strengthened regional partnerships for the SDGs under the new Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS framework.

SYRIA: Koussay Aldahhak, Permanent Representative of Syria to the UN, presented an overview of Syria's second VNR. He outlined lessons learned since the first VNR in 2020, and reported backsliding on several SDGs due to ongoing conflict, including on food security (SDG 2), and education (SDG 4). He further noted national objectives to promote the rule of law, localize the SDGs, and prepare a monitoring system to track sustainable development. Aldahhak lamented international policies, including unilateral sanctions and lack of official development assistance, which have hindered his country's sustainable development.

Discussion: BELARUS, VENEZUELA, OMAN, IRAN, the EDUCATION AND ACADEMIA STAKEHOLDER GROUP, the STATE OF PALESTINE, and the RUSSIAN FEDERATION posed questions. In response, Aldahhak reported participatory processes for the VNR underlined politicization as the main cross-cutting challenge affecting sustainable development, citing reduced energy facility capacity due to sanctions, and calling for an end to collective punishment.

In The Corridors

As is the case every year, the presentation of countries' VNRs is an important component of the official agenda. And with the bulk of countries presenting their second, or even third VNRs, the growing investment by civil society networks to produce alternative reports and interrogate the official accounts were apparent in the pointed questions that were put to some presenters, including by some government delegates. "We need to find a more systematic way to bring together these two realities," said one participant, referring to the series of VNR labs taking place in parallel to the official discussions. While this is also the intention of the in-plenary VNR exchange, "I know that things are not entirely as great as is being painted," sighed one civil society delegate. Perhaps herein lies a balance that the official and informal processes can aspire towards. "What moves us is not the realization that the world falls short of being completely just, which few of us expect, but that there are remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate," one delegate concluded, in the words of celebrated Indian philosopher Amartya Sen.

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