

HLPF 2024 Highlights: Monday, 8 July 2024

The 2024 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), convened under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), opened with a series of keynote addresses introducing the theme of reinforcing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and eradicating poverty in times of multiple crises, and the effective delivery of sustainable, resilient, and innovative solutions. Delegates arrived bearing a series of warnings that progress on some Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has stalled or gone into reverse.

Opening the session, Chair Paula Narváez, President, ECOSOC, introduced a short video highlighting the HLPF session as a critical moment of consequence and choice. She invited delegates to adopt the provisional agenda (E/HLPF/2024/1) and seize the opportunity to identify policy priorities to address long-term global challenges and chart a sustainable, resilient path where no one is left behind. Noting important inputs to the HLPF, including the Report of the UN Secretary-General on “Progress towards the SDGs” (A/79/79-E/2024/54), she highlighted countries and regions facing complex challenges, including those experiencing conflicts that leave deep scars and severely delay realization of the SDGs. She added that protracted crises in Haiti, Gaza, South Sudan, and Ukraine, among others, illustrate that the promise of sustainable development cannot be met in the absence of humanitarian and preventive interventions.

Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, noted the momentum for progress generated by the SDG Summit in 2023 and the importance of the Summit of the Future (SOTF) as an opportunity to restore trust and human solidarity in the face of multiple threats. She announced special sessions during the HLPF, including on transforming education and on financing to achieve the SDGs. She described how institutions are struggling under the weight of rapid technological change and political polarization, and invited delegates to reflect on the toll of protracted conflicts, as well as the need to reform the international financial architecture.

Kaira Umarov, Vice President, ECOSOC (Kazakhstan), offered messages from the ECOSOC system, noting the need for strengthened Council capacity to provide transformative policy guidance at a time of unprecedented convergence of

crises. Umarov highlighted the need for food systems reform; climate resilience; a rights-based approach, including a focus on gender and children’s rights; reform of the international financial architecture and harnessing finance, including for loss and damage; and consideration of the ethical and human rights aspects of governance in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI).

From the SDG Summit to the effective delivery of sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions

This Townhall segment offered perspectives on the HLPF theme, with a focus on accelerating transformative and inclusive strategies to bridge the widening gap in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Li Junhua, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), introduced the UN Secretary-General’s [2024 SDG report](#), stating that in the final stretch towards 2030, only 17% of SDG targets are likely to be achieved. He reiterated the report’s call for bold action on peace and finance, highlighting the upcoming SOTF, the Fourth Financing for Development Conference, and the second World Summit for Social Development, as critical milestones in advancing the SDGs.

Moderator Sherwin Bryce-Pease, Bureau Chief and Correspondent, South African Broadcasting Corporation, opened the interactive panel session. Paulo Rangel, Minister of State and Foreign Affairs, Portugal, stressed that accelerating SDG implementation in the face of multiple crises requires adequate financing and engaging the whole of society if no one is to be left behind.

Noting the disconnect between high-level declarations and SDG action, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Chancellor, Nelson Mandela University, and Chair, UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration, called for a mindset shift towards “putting people first,” including through reframing SDG reporting processes as a citizens’ accountability tool.

Amy Pope, Director-General, International Organization for Migration, highlighted the role of migration as a catalyst for sustainable development, including for leveraging finance, calling for proactive action on safer migration pathways.

José Manuel Salazar-Xirinachs, Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, underlined three axes underpinning means of implementing the 2030 Agenda: finance, policies, and institutional arrangements and capabilities,

stressing that alongside access to data, these are crucial to drive transitions forward. Shannon Lisa, Chemicals and Waste Youth Platform, called for divesting from destructive industries and partnerships, including by establishing a fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty. She stressed meaningful and equitable youth participation at all levels.

In successive rounds of discussions, panelists highlighted, among other priorities:

- the importance of using voluntary local reviews to identify entry points for action;
- effective public communication as an “18th Goal” enabling citizens to hold governments to account; and
- the need to accelerate the digital transition and close the connectivity gap.

In a subsequent general discussion, CHILE, SPAIN, LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, ALGERIA, TIMOR LESTE, POLAND, BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY, INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT LAW ORGANIZATION, INDONESIA, IRELAND, NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS, SRI LANKA, FRANCE, the UK, and the STAKEHOLDER GROUP ON AGING, offered diverse insights. Many identified the urgent need to bridge the SDG financing gap, including through expanding the fiscal space for indebted countries and structural transformation of the international finance and trade system.

Other issues raised included the need for:

- ensuring greater respect for human rights and a just transition centering people and planet;
- addressing the root causes of gender inequality;
- combating corruption and enhancing fiscal transparency; and
- ensuring that frontier technologies such as AI are rights-based and do not create new forms of inequality.

Regarding the forthcoming SOTF, INDONESIA stressed that discussions should not divert attention away from the SDG process. Describing the Summit as the culmination of intense efforts to build youth engagement in multilateral processes, the CHILDREN AND YOUTH MAJOR GROUP (MGCY) lamented removal of references to Major Groups and other Stakeholders in negotiation text. IRELAND underlined that empowering youth means investing in formal and informal education and providing real opportunities for leadership.

SDGs in Focus: SDG 17 and Interlinkages with Other SDGs – Partnerships for the Goals

Chair Narváez noted this segment’s focus on the role of international financial institutions in driving transformative progress towards the SDGs. In keynote remarks, Laura Chinchilla, former President of Costa Rica, called for a new international financial architecture that responds inclusively to the world’s most pressing challenges. She stressed that the widening gap in citizens’ trust in decision-makers’ capabilities to meet the 2030 Agenda is “more dangerous” than the four trillion-dollar SDG finance gap.

Yuxi Zhang, Statistics Division, UN DESA, highlighted selected findings from the Secretary-General’s 2024 report on

progress towards the SDGs, with particular emphasis on SDG 17. Among others, he pointed to a seven percent decrease in foreign direct investment flows.

Moderator Shari Spiegel, Director, Financing for Sustainable Development Office, UN DESA, noted that lack of access to capital markets at affordable rates is an ongoing challenge for many countries that are most in need of financial allocations for sustainable development.

Achim Steiner, Administrator, UN Development Programme, stressed that high interest rates are punitive and debt servicing is prohibitive, with the latter being maintained by “raiding” budgets for healthcare, education, and welfare services. He emphasized the need for an investment pathway that reduces barriers, provides necessary concessional finance, and contributes to countries’ sustainable development rather than increasing their debt.

Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, outlined strategic areas to bridge the finance gap, including by embracing innovative finance tools, developing robust carbon markets, and facilitating the effective and transparent use of public funds.

Greg Levin, Founder, New Leaf Climate Partners, focused on creativity, pragmatism, and alignment as three ways to unlock capital.

Lead discussant Foteini Papagiotti, Acting Deputy Director, Policy and Advocacy, International Center for Research on Women, observed that ending global poverty is increasingly unattainable. Among other things, she called for:

- a multilateral legal framework to address unsustainable debt that is based on the SDGs, human rights, climate, and gender justice;
- accelerating non-debt-creating climate finance, prioritizing women and girls; and
- increased participation of lower- and middle-income countries in macro-economic decision making.

Abdulla Nasser Lootah, Deputy Minister of Cabinet Affairs for Competitiveness and Knowledge Exchange, United Arab Emirates (UAE), outlined the UAE’s contributions, including cooperation with South American countries around the Amazon Basin.

NORWAY, SWITZERLAND, INDIA, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Civil Society Organization Engagement Mechanism, noted priorities for reforming the multilateral financial architecture. Recommendations proposed include:

- scaled-up financing to address human rights and climate change;
- steps to support debt-distressed developing countries;
- issues to be addressed by the 2025 International Conference on Financing for Development; and
- clearer focus by multilateral development banks (MDBs) on global challenges, without compromising their work on global poverty.

UGANDA called for more concessional development finance and exploring innovative instruments. Underlining that financing

conditions for developing countries and debt financing in sub-Saharan Africa are dire, SOUTH AFRICA called for MDBs and donors to increase ambition to match the scale of the challenge. SOUTH AFRICA and SPAIN supported the UN Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus, and, with WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS MAJOR GROUP, called for reforming the global financial system. MGCY lamented poor recognition of informal work and stressed accessible investments for the grassroots communities. SAUDI ARABIA called for robust partnerships and outlined national efforts providing bilateral assistance to developing countries. Several delegates including INDONESIA, MALTA, and THAILAND urged improved partnerships that leverage the strengths of different actors, with IRELAND underlining that governments alone cannot mobilize the necessary resources. INDONESIA called for maximizing blended finance and BRAZIL underlined rethinking tax systems in alignment with SDG achievement. MALTA highlighted the role of faith-based partnerships. WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS MAJOR GROUP called for a focus on social justice and solidarity in SDG investment and called for a new social contract.

SDGs in Focus: Science, technology and innovation: Triggering transformation and sustaining science-driven solutions

Introducing the session, Chair Narváez said discussions would build on the outcomes of the Ninth Multistakeholder Forum on Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI Forum) and related UN initiatives.

In a keynote statement, Christina Markus Lassen, Permanent Representative of Denmark to the UN, and Co-Chair, 2024 STI Forum, said the Forum showcased practical and scalable solutions from young innovators, notably the world's first off-grid milk pasteurizer, and a portable air pollution detector.

Opening the interactive panel discussion, Inga Rhonda King, Co-Chair, 2024 STI Forum, invited speakers to identify strategies to accelerate deployment of such solutions. Carlos Henrique Brito Cruz, Senior Vice-President, Research Networks, Elsevier, said increased investment in scientific collaboration and capacities in the global South are creating "a new geography of research" on the SDGs. He called for greater efforts to foster multi-stakeholder partnerships to help translate such knowledge to action.

Joyeeta Gupta, Professor, University of Amsterdam and IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, stressed the importance of multistakeholder collaboration to ensure that social and environmental costs are fully internalized in SDG programmes, including through redirecting fossil fuel subsidies for a just energy transition.

Subho Mukherjee, Vice President and Global Head of Sustainability, Nokia, underscored the role of cross-border innovation and collaboration in bridging digital divides, especially in rural and remote settings.

Lead discussant Magdalena Stoeva, International Union for Physical and Engineering Sciences in Medicine, and Science and Technology Major Group, noted that while scientific collaboration can help address complex sustainability challenges, human development and planetary resilience must be placed back at the center.

In discussions, delegates including INDIA, ISRAEL, POLAND, the UK, the US, and ARMENIA shared examples of national and multilateral STI initiatives, highlighted the role of statistics and evidence-based decision-making, and called for increased resource mobilization. UGANDA highlighted broader socioeconomic benefits that STI initiatives can leverage. FRANCE urged socially-robust technology development and deployment.

Several delegates, including the STAKEHOLDER GROUP FOR COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT, NEPAL, and the WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP, noted that the increasing digital divide is exacerbating existing inequalities. They called for, among others: rewriting the intellectual property rules at the global and national levels; promoting gender balance and addressing negative externalities; and adopting a rights-based approach in STI policies.

Many delegates also called for increased governance around AI, with CHILE and GUATEMALA stressing the need to tackle misinformation and discrimination. The EDUCATION AND ACADEMIA STAKEHOLDER GROUP highlighted the need for publicly available information on exposure to air pollution in poor communities.

In the Corridors

This morning's musical performance "Umoja" – Swahili for "Unity" – by a New York high school ensemble, evoked the spirit of current "Gen Z-led" protests in Kenya that are inspiring mass action across the continent. A strong youth contingent at this HLPF session is similarly signaling growing impatience with the global status quo and lackluster political will for driving full-throttle "system change."

On the opening day of HLPF 2024, observers voiced diverging views regarding links with the highly anticipated SOTF in September. Some suggested that the Summit could reinvigorate the 2030 Agenda by agreeing on much-needed structural transformations. Others worried that with most SDGs remaining off-track, the SOTF may deflect attention from the HLPF's mandate to drive concerted efforts to accelerate SDG implementation. As one delegate cautioned, "we spent a long time negotiating these goals – we must not abandon them to start all over again with another set of commitments that are not guaranteed to be a success."

Both in the meeting rooms and in the corridors, delegates are clearly not willing to give up on the Goals, but recognize the need to refocus and regroup on a path of convergence dedicated to the integrity of the current process while drawing on the SOTF to bring more disruptive questions to the table.

