

Summary of the Joint Meeting of the Economic and Social Council with the Chairs of the Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies

1 February 2021, 10:00AM-1:00PM

Introduction

The President of the Economic and Social Council, H.E. Munir Akram (Pakistan), convened a meeting of the Bureau of the Council with the Chairpersons of the functional commissions and expert bodies on 1 February 2021. The meeting was held in virtual format and, as in 2020, it was open to the membership of ECOSOC and Observers. Sixteen subsidiary bodies participated in the meeting and were represented at the Chair/Co-Chair level. A representative of civil society was invited to speak at the meeting.¹ It was the first time that the Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Intergovernmental Working Group of Experts on International Standards of Accounting and Reporting and the Committee of Experts on Geographical Names participated in the joint meeting. Over 180 delegations inscribed attending the meeting.

The Chairs shared aspects of the work of their respective bodies particularly in relation to the impact and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a preview of their respective sessions as well as their inputs to the theme of the Council and the High-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF). Member States discussed ways to strengthen the ECOSOC system and synergize the work of the subsidiary bodies, in the context of General Assembly resolution 72/305 and beyond. The meeting was held against the backdrop of the review of resolution 72/305, in conjunction with those on the HLPF², as well as the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, and the Council, and ongoing discussions on strengthening multilateralism in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coordination and oversight

The theme of the 2021 session of the Economic and Social Council and the 2021 HLPF is “*Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development*”. Pursuant to GA resolution 74/298, the HLPF will also review in depth SDG 1, no poverty; SDG 2, zero hunger; SDG 3, good health and well-being; SDG 8, decent work and economic growth; SDG 10, reduced inequalities; SDG 12, responsible consumption and production; SDG 13, climate action; SDG

¹ The Chairs of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (30th session), the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (64th session), the Commission on Population and Development (54th session), the Commission for Social Development (59th session), the Commission on the Status of Women (65th session), the UN Forum on Forests (16th session), the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (24th session), the Committee for Development Policy, the Committee of Experts on Public Administration (19th session), the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Intergovernmental Working Group of Experts on International Standards of Accounting and Reporting and the Chair and a Bureau member of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names as well as the co-Chair of the Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters, the co-Chairs of the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management and the Vice-Chair of the Statistical Commission. The President of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO) also spoke at the meeting.

² GA resolutions 67/290 and 70/299.

16, peace, justice and strong institutions; and SDG 17, means of implementation and partnerships for the Goals.

In addition to their annual work programme, it is expected that the subsidiary bodies will address the ECOSOC theme in their 2021 sessions. The Council and the HLPF can thus expect recommendations from the functional commissions and expert bodies on various aspects of recovering better from COVID-19, including socio-economic policies, data and information management, food security and nutrition, digital and other technologies, governance and institutional elements, forests and sustainable recovery as well as impact of the pandemic on various aspects of human rights.

The unequal impact of COVID-19

One of the paramount concerns expressed in the meeting was the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable and marginalized communities around the world.

The Committee for Development Policy (CDP) found that, although the spread of the pandemic in LDCs has been lower than expected, the socio-economic impacts caused by plunging tourist revenues, falling exports and increased unemployment have been severe. Supporting health systems, providing effective debt relief and new efforts to bridge the digital divide will be essential to support LDCs in building back better from the pandemic. The CDP conducted its triennial review of LDCs at its 23rd session, discussed ways to improve its monitoring of graduating and graduated countries and analyzed the voluntary national reviews (VNRs). It will also provide a substantive input to the 5th LDC Conference.

The Commission on Population and Development noted that the pandemic had greatly affected food security and nutrition already by May of last year, quickly reversing progress being made towards ending hunger and achieving food security and improved nutrition. Priority should be given to meeting the nutritional needs of pregnant and lactating women and of their infants and young children. The CPD's 54th session is making a contribution to the UN Food Systems Summit and discuss the implications of population growth, population ageing, international migration and urbanization for achieving the SDGs.

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed disproportionate burdens on women. The virus has caused women-dominated fields like teaching, nursing, and other frontline healthcare professions to experience increased work-related stress. Childcare responsibilities have also been disproportionately placed on women as a result of school closures and lack of access to childcare facilities. Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life and in COVID-19 recovery plans must be encouraged, as emphasized at CSW65.

The uneven burdens placed by COVID-19 on women were also highlighted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR). The Committee added that many indigenous peoples, refugees, asylum seekers and those living in conflict-affected countries or regions were also particularly vulnerable during the pandemic due to a lack of adequate access to water, soap or sanitizer, COVID-19 testing facilities, health-care services and information. It also noted that inadequate public goods and social services have also deepen global income and wealth inequalities. The CESCR will further promote its *Statement on universal and equitable access to vaccines for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)* approved of 27 November 2020.

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII) reinforced the message that, like other marginalized groups, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected indigenous peoples by exacerbating

pre-existing economic, social, environmental inequalities. All COVID-19 recovery plans should take a human rights-based approach that promotes the rights to self-determination, lands, territories and resources and accessible quality healthcare and education. The PFII 20th session is discussing the role of indigenous peoples in implementing SDG16, including challenges and responses to pandemics.

The Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) stated that stay-at-home measures have increased the likelihood of domestic violence. In addition, cybercriminals are capitalizing on the anxieties and fears of underprivileged groups as well as on the increased demand for COVID-19 related medical products, which has generated diverse fraud schemes. The CCPCJ is expected to adopt at its 30th session, among other, the resolution containing the Political Declaration of the 14th Crime Congress, which took place in Kyoto on 7-12 March 2021.

The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) warned that the world drug problem would become more acute with the COVID-19 pandemic and that the lack of access to drug prevention and treatment has made it more likely that already marginalized populations will engage in more harmful patterns of drug use. The CND 64th session is focusing on the links between drug trafficking, corruption and other forms of organized crime, and the criminal misuse of information and communications technologies, among other.

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) pointed out that the naming of a disease based on its geographical origination can lead to bias, discriminatory and xenophobic actions. For example, the current pandemic should not be identified as a *Wuhan* nor *China disease*, but rather by its scientific name, COVID-19. Identifying COVID-19 variants by the countries of their first occurrences, like *British variant* or *South-African variant*, may also encourage discrimination and induce xenophobic behavior. The UNGEGN is adopting its Strategic Plan and Programme of Work, which terms and strategies are tuned to fit the SDGs.

The importance of quality data and digital technologies

The pandemic has shown the integral role of reliable and quality data to readily assess the impact of COVID-19, develop needs assessments, design effective policies and tools to tackle them where and when necessary, and monitor implementation and progress. As the world navigated towards digital platforms, the digital divide widened. Tackling it requires integrated policymaking and investment in data-related infrastructure and education.

The Statistical Commission noted that the pandemic has increased the need and importance of high-quality data and statistics as well as the demands on the skills and expertise of national statistical offices for data standardization, integration, and robust analysis to allow policy makers to see things sooner and act faster. These are critical for targeted decisions and subsequent follow up, helping to reduce the unequal impact of the pandemic on citizens and sectors of the economy. While restrictions on mobility and national lock downs have affected how National Statistical Offices conduct their work, the global statistical community has shown great resilience and agility, embracing innovative approaches and forging partnerships. The Commission's 52nd session adopted the System of Environmental–Economic Accounting–Ecosystem Accounting (SEEA EA) which represents a significant step towards going beyond GDP and ensuring natural capital is also recognized in economic reporting.

The Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) recognized that the most vulnerable countries continue to face the greatest challenges in collecting, analyzing and using

high-quality, timely and reliable data, including geospatial data, Earth observations, statistics and other location-based data. Data in developing countries is often not discoverable, structured, interoperable or standardized, which means critical data might not be readily accessed, shared and integrated with other data for decision-making. The UN-GGIM will continue its collaboration with the Statistical Commission and the UN system to integrate geospatial and statistical information systems to operationalize the use of geospatial information in response to the SDGs as well as the pandemic.

The Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) highlighted that science, technology and innovation (STI) have played a critical role in mitigating the impact of the pandemic. Data and digital technologies for health are transforming how health services are delivered and how health systems are managed. However, solid digital infrastructure and bridging the digital divide are pre-requisites for a broad roll-out of digital health. The CSTD 24th session is addressing the role of STI in a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and reviewing progress in the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society, among other.

The Commission for Social Development (CSocD) also focused on the digital divide and its role as a driver of inequality. The digital divide has worsened during the pandemic due to uneven access to digital technologies and digital infrastructure, which have had systemic effects on education, unemployment, and healthcare access. The widening gap, along with many other factors, has reversed progress made towards the 2030 Agenda. Initiatives that aim to decrease the digital divide must also place an emphasis on enhancing digital literacy. The CSocD discussed the role of digital technologies in social development and in the context of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond during its 59th session.

Financing the recovery from COVID-19 and achieving the 2030 Agenda

It was recognized that recovery plans are demanding extraordinary financial resources and developing countries, which among other challenges often borrow at a higher rate than developed countries, risk the prospect of debt crises if lending conditions are not reviewed. Various aspects of financing the recovery featured in the dialogue.

The Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters stated that building the capacity of Member States to strengthen tax administration and tax policy, particularly broadening the tax base and curbing tax avoidance and evasion, will be key for countries to finance their response and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as for achieving the SDGs. Both domestic efforts and multilateral action will be necessary, and the most vulnerable countries will need international support. The Committee is developing an optional bilateral tax treaty article on taxation of automated digital services, taking a whole-of-government approach. It also identified several areas in the issue of Tax and SDGs requiring prioritization, which it continues to discuss during its 22nd session.

The Intergovernmental Working Group of Experts on International Standards of Accounting and Reporting (ISAR) identified that high-quality corporate reporting and the further incorporation of environment, social and governance criteria (ESG) into capital market activities and financial instruments is key to enable a resilient, sustainable, and inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also crucial to the transition to a low-carbon and circular economy and the mitigation of climate change related risks. ISAR continued to review its "*Guidance on core indicators for entity reporting on contribution towards implementation of Sustainability Development Goals*" and working towards a set of standardized, robust sustainability reporting standards.

The Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) highlighted the importance of building effective public institutions as a strategic policy area as well as for restoring trust. It further noted that effective governance and the strengthening of multilateralism are necessary for proper public financial management. The financing of COVID-19 recovery plans is jeopardized by illicit financial flows, tax evasion and money laundering, all of which divert funds from the public treasury and undermine the provision of essential public services. CEPA agreed on a set of 11 principles of effective governance for sustainable development, which it is further elaborating and collaborating with regional organizations to promote their operationalization at its 20th session.

The United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) pointed out that mobilizing financial resources, strengthening scientific and technical cooperation, and promoting governance frameworks for coordination and coherence and international cooperation are essential for sustainable forest management. The understanding of the relationships between people and nature, including forests, is important in the full consideration of the economic, social and environmental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-term bearings on people and the planet, as well as in reducing the risks against future pandemics. The UNFF is launching at its 16th session its first-ever flagship publication, “The Global Forest Goals Report 2021”.

Review of implementation of GA resolution 72/305

The Bureau of the Council, the Chairs of subsidiary bodies and Member States exchanged views and ideas to improve the ECOSOC system, building on GA resolution 72/305 and in view of the ongoing review of the resolution.

In the exchanges, it was highlighted that collaboration between the subsidiary bodies can help identify areas of overlapping mandates and promote the sharing of useful information and best practices. GA resolution 72/305 requested subsidiary bodies to cooperate with each other and cooperation has been increasing, including with the regional commissions.

Examples of cooperation were shared, such as those between the Statistical Commission and CSW, CPD, PFII, CSocD, CEPA and CND; between UN-GGIM, UNGEGN and the Statistical Commission; between CND and CCPCJ, CSW and the Human Rights Council; between CEPA and CPD, CDP and the Peacebuilding Commission; between the PFII and CSW; between the Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters and other international bodies like the OECD, IMF, The World Bank Group and other regional tax groupings.

Chairs underscored the importance of ECOSOC’s support in enhancing horizontal cooperation among subsidiary bodies as well as in increasing visibility of the work of all subsidiary bodies. They also urged the Council to take on board the outcome of their work and create more opportunities for their participation in meetings and events. Moreover, in order to be able to adequately prepare and organize their sessions in the most fruitful manner, it is important for the subsidiary bodies to have timely guidance on the theme of the Council and the HLPF. Specific requests for contributions on their respective area of expertise could also be made throughout the cycle in a timely manner. Some Chairs noted the difficulty presented by the incompatibility of the timeline of their sessions and that of the preparation of documentation for the HLPF.

Participants called for better use of the synergies between the Council and the HLPF. This would allow for a responsive feedback cycle between the reviews, including the VNRs, and the work of ECOSOC and its subsidiary machinery, in support of Member States' implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

There are subsidiary bodies that already do work in relation with the VNRs, such as the CDP and CEPA. Nevertheless, there is scope to explore more ways to seek the incorporation of the work of subsidiary bodies in the VNRs in a more consistent way. As an example, CEPA started to invite interested VNR countries to engage in a dialogue on institutional aspects of SDG 16 during its session, in addition to the exchanges during the VNR Labs. Moreover, the PFII highlighted that, while 14 of the 47 countries presenting VNRs in the 2020 HLPF referred to indigenous peoples within their presentations, further incorporation and consideration of the rights of indigenous peoples in national strategies and the upcoming VNRs remains essential. A way to feed the analyses of the VNRs by the CDP into the review system could also prove beneficial.

The Vice-President of ECOSOC (Mexico) and chair of the Integration Segment made proposals regarding possible ways to consider the integrated policy conclusions of the subsidiary bodies of the Council.

Takeaways and recommendations from the discussion

- a) The desire to foster an integrated and inclusive approach to building back better and leaving no one behind in the pursuit of sustainable development is at the heart of ECOSOC's agenda and the work of its subsidiary bodies.
- b) The presentations showed the true interlinked nature of the work of the Council and its subsidiary machinery. The coordination role of the Council is a powerful instrument to enhance cross collaboration for the analysis of interlinkages and unlocking the synergies therein.
- c) The Council could make proposals to the co-facilitators of the review of ECOSOC and the HLPF towards institutionalizing the links between the substantial body of work of its subsidiary machinery and the HLPF.
- d) Cooperation between the Council and its subsidiaries with other bodies within and outside of the UN System is important. Increased involvement of the Regional Commissions would also be beneficial.
- e) There were proposals to consider megatrends or global challenges as cross-cutting themes for the work of the Council. CPD suggested population ageing as a cross-cutting theme for 2022 or 2023.
- f) It was proposed to recognize the Presidential Summary of the Special Meeting on International Cooperation in Tax Matters as an official input to the HLPF's thematic review of SDG 17.

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