

**Summary by the President of the Economic and Social Council of  
the  
High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development  
convened under the auspices of the Council at its 2021 session**

**Introduction**

The high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was convened from 6 to 15 July 2021 in hybrid and virtual formats due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It included a three-day ministerial segment from 13 to 15 July 2020. Eight Heads of State and Government, more than 100 Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers and Vice Ministers and more than 170 high-level speakers from countries, the United Nations system and other stakeholders from around the world participated in the Forum.

The theme of the 2021 HLPF was *“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”*. The Forum’s deliberations focused on ways to ensure a sustainable and resilient recovery that would put the world back on track to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during the Decade of Action and Delivery.

While recognizing the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the SDGs, the Forum undertook an in-depth focus on SDG1 (no poverty), SDG2 (zero hunger), SDG3 (good health and well-being), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG12 (sustainable consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and SDG17 on partnerships. The Forum also considered the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the SDGs. It also covered the targets of the SDGs with a 2020 timeline.

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021, prepared by the Secretary-General in advance of the session, substantiated the great concern about the impacts of COVID-19 on the SDGs, notably on poverty, hunger, health, jobs, women, inequality and leaving no one behind, as well as about the continuing environmental and climate crises.

The Forum expressed its continued strong commitment to the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, which were seen as roadmaps for recovering better from COVID-19. At the same time, significant concern was expressed regarding poverty and hunger, which were on the rise after years of decline, a trend exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Forum expressed concerns regarding increasing inequalities among countries and that many developing countries, in particular countries in special situations, could be left behind on the path towards implementing the SDGs. Many developing countries are still in the midst of coping with the pandemic and are routinely lacking access to both the vaccine and the fiscal resources necessary for their health and socio-economic response. At the same time, many developed countries are starting to emerge from the pandemic, in part thanks to vaccine availability and the implementation of well-funded recovery programmes.

Forty-two countries carried out voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of their implementation of the 2030 Agenda many of whom highlighted policies and actions for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic as part of their presentations.

Due to the virtual nature of the 2020 HLPF and ECOSOC High-level Segment, the General Debate consisted of the submission of 77 written and video statements. Seventy-one were received from Member States and Observers, five from Major Groups and other stakeholders and one from UN entities.

There were 276 side events, 10 special events, 17 VNR Labs and 12 exhibitions organized in the margins of the Forum, demonstrating the continued strong convening power of the HLPF.

The Forum made special efforts to be accessible to people of different abilities and provided Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) service, international sign language and an Easy Read programme.

## **Key messages and proposals**

The discussions produced the following key messages:

- 1) The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on all aspects of the **lives and livelihoods** of people across the world, and on efforts to achieve the SDGs. However, the poor and vulnerable living in developing countries have been disproportionately impacted;

- 2) Vaccines for COVID-19 should be considered a global public good. Global recovery from the pandemic will depend on the equitable and **universal access to affordable, safe and effective vaccines** and treatments for the COVID-19 pandemic for all people and all countries. The development of a **Global Vaccination Plan** was proposed, and countries were encouraged to support the proposed **global treaty on pandemics**;
- 3) Renewed **global solidarity and international cooperation** are needed to achieve vaccine equity and address deep-seated inequalities at all levels. Besides the use of TRIPS flexibilities and the waiver of certain intellectual property provisions, options to help increase production include voluntary licences, technology pools and platforms, The COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) could serve as a voluntary mechanism for sharing intellectual property, knowledge and data.
- 4) The pandemic has deepened **inequalities** among and within countries; **developing countries** would need urgent support, including access to concessional resources and debt relief. Some speakers proposed the use of a **multidimensional vulnerability index** for considering the financing needs of SIDS to take into account structural vulnerabilities to a variety of shocks;
- 5) **Women**, older persons, youth and children, migrants and refugees, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and other **vulnerable groups** are among the most deeply affected by the pandemic, leading to calls for a **renewed social contract to address inequality and exclusion and provide access to justice for all**;
- 6) The crisis serves as a much-needed wake-up call to spur a decade of truly **transformative action** to deliver for people and planet. This requires **transformative leadership and political will**, supported by effective institutions and policies, to build back better and ensure firm commitment on leaving no one behind;
- 7) The **2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement** on climate change provide blueprints for a sustainable and resilient recovery;
- 8) Strengthened people-centered and gender-responsive **health and social protection systems** are needed with a focus on combatting inequality and empowering women and groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic. It was proposed to create a **global fund for social protection**;

- 9) **Gender equality and women's empowerment** are important for a more inclusive and just society and key for a sustained and sustainable recovery.
- 10) Climate change, biodiversity loss and the transition to a **green economy** are among the top priorities. While the COVID-19 crisis has gravely impacted countries' abilities to achieve the 2030 Agenda, **climate change** looms as one of the biggest hurdles.
- 11) Global population growth and the unsustainable use of natural resources has a devastating impact on the planet, propelling climate change, destroying nature and increasing pollution levels. Countries must **enhance their national climate action plans and ambitions** to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement and pursue a low carbon development pathway. Proposals included the drafting a **global convention on plastic waste** and the establishment of a **science-policy body for chemicals and waste**;
- 12) Food systems need to feed a growing world population safely, sufficiently and in the long term while protecting the climate and biodiversity and contributing to prosperity The **Food Systems Summit** in September will be an opportunity to affirm the need to move towards sustainable food systems.
- 13) Adequate **financial resources and debt relief and restructuring** are urgently needed to support developing countries' recovery from COVID-19. Countries welcome the new general allocation of **Special Drawing Rights** and the extension of the **G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative**. Countries also proposed for reallocation of unutilized quotas of Special Drawing Rights to the countries most in need.
- 14) Economic recovery and **stimulus packages** should trigger investments in the SDGs, address climate change and protect the environment. The proposed **Global Recovery Initiative** would link investments and debt relief to the SDGs to secure green and inclusive recovery and a truly transformative, post-COVID-19 sustainable development path.
- 15) International support for LDCs and LLDCs needed to go beyond official development assistance and include innovative financing, debt relief, trade support and market access measures. The creation of a **High-level Panel of Experts on the debt of LDCs** was proposed.
- 16) Member states emphasized that in order to build resilience against future shocks and to build back better; it is imperative to bridge the existing infrastructure gap between developed and developing countries. During the Pandemic this gap has widened as investments

declined by US \$50bn in 2020. They called for support to the proposal for a high-level dialogue on sustainable infrastructure investment at the United Nations to support developing countries in leapfrogging in the development domain;

- 17) **Technology**, in particular digital technology, and **closing the digital divide** are essential for recovering from the pandemic and achieving the 2030 Agenda. It was emphasized that the ECOSOC must also ensure fair technology transfers to developing countries to advance their necessary digital transformation and to collaboratively work to develop open source technology platforms. The 'Tech Access Partnership' launched by the UN Technology Bank, UNDP and WHO was highlighted as an initiative to increase LDCs' access to health technologies and strengthen their local protection capacities;
- 18) Effective implementation of the SDGs requires good data and statistics and there is an urgent need to assist developing countries in building **digital data infrastructure and capacity development**.
- 19) The sustainable development goals cannot be realized without **strong partnerships** at local, national, regional and global levels and by including a wide variety of partners and stakeholders through participatory approaches.

### **Ministerial Declaration**

The HLPF adopted a Ministerial Declaration (E/HLPF/2021/L.2) which strongly reaffirmed the 2030 Agenda as a blueprint for sustainable recovery and the need for strong multilateralism and global solidarity to build more inclusive societies. The health and socio-economic crisis caused by the pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated the world's vulnerabilities and inequalities within and among countries, accentuated systemic weaknesses, challenges and risks and threatens to halt or damage progress made in realizing the SDGs. Member States agreed that at the center of a global recovery was equitable, affordable access for all to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines as well as access to concessional financing and debt relief for developing countries. The Declaration also enumerated a number of measures and accelerated actions that needed to be undertaken in all nine SDGs under in-depth review this year, but also in all others as well as in cross-cutting areas such as gender, children and youth, climate and biodiversity.

## Opening

The opening of the 2021 HLPF included welcoming remarks by the President of ECOSOC and a presentation by the ECOSOC Vice-President (Mexico) on messages from the ECOSOC Integration Segment. These were followed by keynote addresses by the President of Senegal, the Director-General of WHO, the Managing Director of the IMF, the Director-General of WTO and 2019 Nobel Laureate Professor Michael Kremer.

Noting the devastating effects of the COVID19 pandemic across the world on people's livelihoods, health systems and the struggles of economies especially the most vulnerable nations, the President of ECOSOC warned that development progress had been halted and even reversed. The 2030 Agenda and the Addis Abba Action Agenda must guide the response to the pandemic. The 2021 HLPF was an opportunity to demonstrate unwavering commitment to the 2030 Agenda to build an inclusive and sustainable path during the Decade of Action, despite the obstacles and challenges posed by the pandemic.

The Vice-President of ECOSOC (Mexico) shared key messages from the 2021 Integration Segment that concluded on the preceding Friday. These included the following ten points.

1. Regaining trust in institutions and strengthening the social contract.
2. Leaving no one unvaccinated to leave no one behind.
3. Eliminating inequalities.
4. Making the economic recovery so that it protects the planet and the people.
5. Adopting a new, more equitable and sustainable development model.
6. Recovering with social progress.
7. Leaving no one disconnected to achieve global digital connectivity.
8. Having reliable data.
9. Reducing the fragility of vulnerable countries.
10. Consolidating a new effective and deliberative ECOSOC.

The Prime Minister of Senegal underscored the importance of overcoming the pandemic and related its effects on Africa. He encouraged global efforts to build an inclusive economy, emphasized that developing countries are demanding reforms to create conditions more conducive for

financing for development, and called for a fairer and more inclusive world order to help in the recovery efforts.

Speakers also stressed that ensuring equitable, universal and affordable access to the COVID-19 vaccine was not just a moral obligation but the financial imperative, and the only way to overcome the pandemic and create the conditions for a resilient and sustainable world recovery. The Heads of WHO, IMF and WTO reiterated their call for a \$50 billion upfront investment in vaccinating at least 60% of the global population by the middle of 2022. The Director-General of WHO asked countries to urgently donate doses and share their mRNA vaccine technologies with WHO mechanisms as well as to support the Pandemic Treaty proposal.

## **Thematic reviews**

### **The SDGs in time of crisis: A sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19 as an opportunity to realize the SDGs**

The Forum agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts on the economic, social and environmental aspects of the lives of millions of people across the world, deepening existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable, and undermining progress made towards the achievement of the SDGs. Urgent cross-cutting measures, aimed at strengthening social protection, health systems, economic stimulus and environmental protection, must be taken to ensure that the recovery from the pandemic is sustainable, inclusive and resilient, and puts the world back on track to realizing the 2030 Agenda.

Speakers emphasized that the global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will depend on the availability of the vaccines for all countries and people, and stressed that equitable and universal access to affordable, safe and effective vaccines and treatments was all critical in this regard. Participants stressed the need to adopt people-centered and gender-responsive health and social protection systems with a focus on combatting inequality and empowering women, girls, youth and other groups that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic as part of an inclusive and equitable recovery.

In light of the devastating economic impact of the pandemic and with high fiscal deficits, low revenues and high and growing debt, mobilizing domestic resources to meet peoples' needs and stimulate fast recovery presents a challenge for developing countries, LDCs and LLDCs. The **Debt Service Suspension Initiative Common Framework for Debt**

**Treatments**, approved by the G20 and the Paris Club, was viewed as an important tool for alleviating financial burdens of developing countries and supporting their recovery efforts

### **Ensuring that no one is left behind**

The Forum observed that inequalities among and within countries have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic itself affected regions, countries and people within those countries differently. The least developed countries are among those disproportionately and most severely affected by the pandemic, particularly those with economies concentrated in a few sectors, such as tourism. At the global level, economic inequality between the Global North and Global South have become particularly pronounced in the aftermath of the pandemic as wealthier countries are rebuilding their economies while poorer countries are still struggling to address the immediate health crisis.

Speakers noted that inequalities highlighted by the pandemic did not solely exist on a geographical level. Women, older persons, youth and children, migrants and refugees, low-wage earners, informal workers, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, remote or rural communities, and other vulnerable groups have likewise been disproportionately affected. Women and migrants were at greater risk of losing their jobs, housing and access to healthcare, among other basic necessities. Any adequate response in addressing inequality needs to address the specific and contextualized concerns of those most severely affected, particularly with regard to addressing healthcare and equitable vaccine access.

Since existing inequalities manifest themselves at national, regional and global levels, and are drawn along gender, ethnic, economic and among other lines, several participants stressed that digital development could act as a great equalizer in bridging these divides. As such, policy efforts must integrate **digital development** that allow for meaningful access to digital resources for all, and specifically for marginalized groups.

### **Building resilience against future shocks through structural changes and investment in sustainable infrastructure**

Participants agreed that infrastructure investment should be prioritized in the context of the global recovery and the 2030 Agenda. Investments in health and education infrastructure as well as hard infrastructure, in renewable energy, transport, ICT, roads and urban systems were highlighted as particularly important to withstand future shocks and create more just and inclusive societies. Many participants also stressed

that hard and soft, social infrastructure were intertwined and interdependent, pointing to the need to take into consideration the local as well as social and economic contexts when implementing infrastructure projects.

Many speakers touched upon the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the need for risk-evaluation to build resilience against future shocks. Practical suggestions included the use of regular stress tests by countries and organizations; making social protection systems more shock responsive; and extending social assistance and social insurance to cover all groups even in non-crisis time to ensure rights-based universal social protection for all people at all times.

The Forum stressed the importance of international cooperation and collaboration around infrastructure to build resilience. International collaboration was needed particularly in the areas of financing, vaccination distribution, and market access. Regarding predictable and adequate resources, multilateral development banks and international donors needed to ensure access to resources for developing countries or provide concessionary financing. Participants also reaffirmed the crucial role of the United Nations in ensuring that infrastructure was not only resilient but also inclusive, including through convening of an inclusive high-level dialogue on investments in sustainable infrastructures.

### **The inter-relationship between humans and the environment: the need for integrated and holistic approaches in building resilience to future pandemics**

The 2030 Agenda is rooted in the fact that human development and wellbeing cannot be achieved without simultaneously safeguarding and investing in nature and ensuring a healthy planet. With the collective focus on socio-economic and health aspects of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a risk that the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises receive less attention and even fewer resources, despite the clear links between health, environment and the economy. To recover sustainably from the COVID-19 pandemic and its socioeconomic impact, it is imperative to invest a greater share of the funding allocated for crisis recovery into measures that support the transformation towards low-carbon, sustainable and resilient economies, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

It was stressed that planetary sustainability for people, prosperity and equity require addressing the common environmental challenges of climate change, pollution and nature loss. To address these challenges,

transformative and accelerated actions in support of three interlinked and mutually reinforcing strategic objectives were required: stabilizing the climate, living in harmony with nature and achieving a pollution-free planet. Priority areas for actions for the international community include scaling up global climate action; halting and reversing biodiversity loss; sound management of chemicals and waste; open and inclusive multilateralism in the area of the environment and adequate and predictable funding.

## **SDGs in focus**

### **How do we get on track to end poverty and hunger, and transform towards inclusive and sustainable economies? - SDGs 1, 2, 8, 17 and interlinkages among those goals and with other SDGs**

Speakers underscored that poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition were on the rise after a sustained decline over the past decades, threatening livelihoods and well-being of people around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation by disproportionately affecting the poorest and most vulnerable populations and adding an estimated 119 – 124 million people to the ranks of the poor in 2020. The pandemic has also exacerbated existing inequalities, including gender inequality, and disclosed the inadequacies of existing health, economic, social protection, and food systems.

Several participants stressed that strategies to reduce poverty need to go beyond income poverty and address the multiple dimensions of poverty and hunger. A rights-based approach to social protection is necessary to protect all people, including informal agricultural workers and small-scale farmers, to address their economic insecurity and vulnerability. In this context, **a global fund for social protection** could be established to support universal social protection systems.

Participants also acknowledged the need for a reform of the agricultural sector in order for it to become sustainable and reduce its environmental footprint. Small-scale agriculture producers, as the main producers in rural areas, needed greater support, in particular access to insurance, safety nets, and agricultural and information technology. The **Secretary-General's Food Systems Summit**, to be held in September 2021, will be an important opportunity for the promotion of a new, more durable and sustainable food system.

## How do we revamp and transform consumption and production and address and mitigate climate change? - SDGs 12, 13, 17 and interlinkages among these goals and with other SDGs

The Forum noted the interlinked crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, land use changes and unsustainable agricultural practices as well as pollution, especially plastic pollution, and waste, all of which are driven by human activities. It highlighted in this context the underfunding of, and underinvestment in, green technology and nature-based solutions, including in pandemic recovery spending, despite the worsening state of the environment and an increasing threat to lives and livelihoods.

Many participants called upon governments and the private sector to accelerate and scale up the implementation of their plans and commitments to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production and to meet the objectives of the Paris Climate Agreement. They noted the urgent need for countries to enhance their respective nationally-determined contributions towards reaching carbon neutrality by 2050 and scale up climate finance and to accelerate the transition away from fossil-fuel and high-emissions-based economies towards economies that are low carbon, renewable, sustainable and resilient.

Several participants emphasized the need for a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach to promote the shift to sustainable production practices and changes in consumption patterns through a multi-stakeholder process engaging cities, regional, local and community actors and involving women and youth, older people, people living with disabilities, smallholder farmers and traditionally marginalized groups.

Some speakers noted a lack of effective environmental governance tools to achieve sustainable production and consumption patterns. There was a **proposal to launch, at UNEA-5 in February 2022, negotiations towards a convention on plastics, establish a science-policy body for chemicals and waste similar to the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and develop guidelines to improve the sustainability of mineral resources extraction and infrastructure.** Efforts to **scale-up the implementation of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production** also needed to be intensified.

## **How do we get on track for building more peaceful, equal and inclusive societies? - SDGs 3, 10, 16, 17 and interlinkages among those goals and with other SDGs**

The Forum agreed that inequalities within and among countries had worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, and vulnerable populations had faced the brunt of the negative socio-economic and health impacts of the pandemic. Several speakers emphasized in that context that gender-based inequalities and risks had particularly deteriorated, with negative impacts on the safety and socio-economic wellbeing of women and girls. Persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples have also been significantly affected. It was also emphasized that inequalities in pandemic response and recovery have been exacerbated by the digital divide and unequal access to technology.

Some speakers noted that combatting illicit financial flows, including through developing anti-corruption frameworks, eliminating tax havens, immediate return of stolen assets; penalties on the financial institutions, lawyers and accountants, and other “enablers” of corruption, crime and tax evasion; disclosure of the “beneficial ownership” of companies; a global minimum corporate tax; fair digital taxation; review and revision of unequal investment treaties; and a coherent mechanism for monitoring illicit financial flows set up under the United Nations, increasing access to justice, strengthening peacebuilding institutions and increasing transparency and accountability were essential for just and resilient societies. Other speakers stressed that accountable governance and robust institutions, as well as independent, competent and impartial judiciaries, were vital to ensure justice and protect the rights of vulnerable populations.

Some participants called for a **renewed social contract to address inequality and exclusion and provide access to justice for all**. Participants also noted that building back better required approaches based on human rights and taking into account the impacts of climate change, and needed to involve all stakeholders, including youth, migrants, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities. Social protection schemes introduced in response to the pandemic should be further expanded to strengthen resilience in the future.

### **Looking at the 2020 targets: implementation and review**

Through the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, Member States decided that certain targets within the SDGs should be achieved within an accelerated timeline by 2020. These targets had been agreed earlier in other

intergovernmental processes, such as the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and others.

The record of achievement for the 21 targets that were meant to mature in 2020 is mixed, as indicated in the 2021 SDG Progress Report. While there has been progress with regards to some targets, nowhere was progress considered to be adequate.

Some speakers expressed strong interest in updating the 2020 targets within the 2030 Agenda, though it was stressed that updates should not be made at the expense of the integrity of the Agenda. Many delegations stated that any updates should reflect a higher level of ambition.

To review the 2020 targets, a **proposal was made to distinguish three categories of targets: targets for which a thematic intergovernmental body existed and for which a review process was underway; targets for which such a body existed but for which no agreed review mechanism was yet established; and those targets which did not benefit from a thematic review body.**

**It was also suggested that the UN Secretariat conduct an analysis of the 2020 targets which would contain a proposal on how updates of these targets could be brought into the existing framework of the 2030 Agenda.**

### **International solidarity and cooperation**

#### **Coming together to help Small Island Developing States to get on a path to realize the SDGs**

The Forum highlighted the particular vulnerabilities of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which had been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. There was broad agreement that timely action is necessary to implement an approach that adequately addresses the unique vulnerabilities of SIDS and promoted their resilience.

It was emphasized that GDP should not be the only indicator of economic vulnerability, as some SIDS have been deemed ineligible for concessional financing due to the frameworks in place. Many speakers pointed out that economic recessions, pandemics, and climate change posed existential threats to SIDS. The issue of long-term unsustainable debt due to the compounding effects of external shocks and stresses on SIDS was also raised.

Speakers called for the creation of a **multidimensional vulnerability index (MVI)** to take into account the unique circumstances of SIDS. Such an index needed to be inclusive and gender-sensitive in light of the specific challenges faced by women and girls in SIDS.

### **Restoring the conditions for SDG progress in African countries, Least Developed Countries and Landlocked Developing Countries**

Speakers underscored that COVID-19 remained a priority concern for countries in Africa, as well as LDCs and LLDCs, many of which face a variety of challenges combined with limited coping and response capacities prior to the onset of the pandemic. Because of the crisis, countries were also confronted with significant reductions in financial resources from fiscal and external sources. These challenges, coupled with structural weaknesses, rising rates of poverty and inequality, and weak health and education systems hamper the achievement of the SDGs. In addition, environmental stress and climate change have a negative impact on food production, threatening food security and leading to a rise in hunger. In these circumstances, recovery and building back better is uncertain and require concerted national action and international support.

Strengthening regional integration and cooperation is vital for prosperity in Africa, LDCs and LLDCs, especially in areas of trade, transport and communication infrastructure, disease prevention, and managing shared resources, including deep sea resources. There was agreement that those countries need to also take actions that recognized the interlinkages between COVID-19 and social, economic and environmental factors. For example, effective public health and education responses, including the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines, need to proceed hand in hand with rebuilding economies better, taking into account the need to protect the environment, as well as measures to adjust and mitigate climate change.

Participants agreed that international support beyond official development assistance (ODA) is critical and needs to include a mix of innovative financing from all sources, debt relief, trade support and market access measures. In this context, many speakers looked forward to a productive **Fifth UN Conference on the LDCs (LDC5)** in Doha, Qatar in January 2022.

## Regional and local approaches

### Messages from the regions

Participants expressed appreciation for the work of the Regional Commissions and the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development. The Regional Forums provide valuable space for discussion, peer learning, and dialogue among actors on the impacts of the pandemic and responses to it. They provide an opportunity to reflect on progress towards the 2030 Agenda, exchange good practices, and enhance action.

Among the concerns shared across regions were the **disproportionate effects of the pandemic on women, youth, and older persons, and inequality broadly, inadequate social protection, reduced growth, disruptions to trade, inadequate connectivity, infrastructure and digital skills, and the need for sufficient financing**. It was noted that the **climate crisis** is compounding the challenge of the pandemic.

The Regional Commissions are mobilizing concrete actions in response to the effects of the pandemic, including in the area of data and statistics. Some participants emphasized the need for collective responses. Such a response is needed in specific areas, such as vaccines, liquidity, and favorable financing conditions, but also in order to comprehensively recover and build back better.

### Going local

The Forum agreed that local and regional governments play a critical role in implementing the 2030 Agenda. **According to some estimates, two-thirds of the SDGs can only be achieved at the local and regional levels**. Empowering cities, towns, and municipalities can yield significant results given their proximity to constituents and their ability to develop locally suitable innovations that can be scaled up globally.

The significant increase in Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) highlights the importance of engagement at all levels of governance for global progress and showcases the willingness and ability of local governments to serve as actors of change. It was noted that support for further advancement of SDG localization supports attainment of the SDGs also nationally and globally. For example, at the national level, aggregation of local data and information can reveal inconsistencies in SDG implementation, policy gaps nationwide, and areas for data improvements. VLRs can also feed into VNRs and provide a much fuller picture of the realities on the ground as well as enhance a dialogue between different levels of government.

Speakers also pointed out, however, that local and regional governments often face several challenges in conducting VLRs and in contributing more towards SDG implementation. International and national institutions, including the UN system and associations of local and regional authorities, can contribute to capacity-building, for example, by providing peer learning opportunities, technical support and regional collaboration initiatives.

### **Vision and priorities of civil society, the private sector and other major groups and stakeholders: realizing the SDGs during the COVID-19 recovery**

Many participants stressed that **major groups and other stakeholders play a key role as critical voices in society**. The pandemic had contributed to a shrinking space for these voices. Further, trust is essential for stable economic growth and development, and stakeholders ability to jointly engage in issues and activities is crucial to building trust in society. It was noted that inclusive and meaningful participation of all actors require open and tolerant societies. All actors need to have trust in the process and a shared understanding of the mechanisms for participation.

A participant observed that older persons and other vulnerable groups had suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. Deeply rooted implicit biases, including ageism against older persons, mentalism against persons with mental conditions, and ableism against persons with disabilities, cause many to be left behind, disregarded and marginalized. Violations of their human rights have skyrocketed, by omission or commission, via discriminatory policies, procedures, theories, programs, laws, and lack of culpability. It was recommended that governments establish procedures and the appropriate space for inclusion of stakeholders as key partners and enablers to help decision-making, legislation, policies and programmes at every level.

One speaker noted that progress towards true gender equality could be achieved by fully implementing an agenda of inclusion that consciously brings diverse and marginalized persons to the table to develop policies and programmes, addresses their specific needs and protects stakeholder participation at all levels. Another speaker reminded the Forum that the principle of “nothing about us without us” touched on every aspect of the lives of people who belong to excluded, marginalized and vulnerable groups. A key to protecting the rights of women and vulnerable groups is upholding the right to participate in decision-making that affects them.

## Means of implementation

### Mobilizing science, technology and innovation and strengthening the science-policy-society interface

The Forum reaffirmed the key role of technological advancement and digital transformation in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs and the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’. There was broad consensus that international cooperation should be further expanded and deepened in the field of science, technology and innovation (STI). Many underlined the value of a global free flow of scientific and technological knowledge, data, and ideas across national and disciplinary borders. Moreover, there was broad agreement on the need to further strengthen and incentivize multi-stakeholder multidisciplinary partnerships and interfaces at all levels to bring together a broad range of actors and perspectives. In this context, the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) should support partnerships for scaling-up innovations for the SDGs.

It was emphasized that we must ensure fair technology transfers to developing countries to advance their necessary digital transformation and to collaboratively work to develop open source technology platforms. The ‘Tech Access Partnership’ launched by the UN Technology Bank, UNDP and WHO was highlighted as an initiative to increase LDCs’ access to health technologies and strengthen their local protection capacities.

Participants agreed that closing the digital divide is an absolute imperative for achieving the 2030 agenda. This means providing the entire world with high-quality, reliable, and affordable Internet access, as well as promoting digital literacy and skills. Many underlined the necessity of closing the gender digital divide, the true severity of which is likely underestimated. It was noted that gender digital inequality is also driven by online gender-based violence and abuse requiring the security of women online to be a priority. One participant warned that STI policy is often gender blind and thus governments may unwittingly increase or widen the gender gap. It was further observed that women were unrepresented within the STI community prior to the pandemic, a situation which was further exacerbated by COVID-19 because of the burden of additional unpaid care work traditionally placed on women.

Several participants warned that technological advancement and innovation, for all its promises and benefits, also leads to new challenges. Without societal deliberation, transparent governance and enabling legislation in place, data collection and surveillance could result in violations of human rights, misuse of information, conflicts, political oppression and economic inequality. It was stressed that **national**

**STI4SDG roadmaps** could be useful, strategic tools for ensuring policy coherence, linking public and private actions, and optimizing investments. It was recommended by the STI Forum that the TFM should further promote international cooperation on policy, plans and capacity-building, including the Partnership in Action on STI4SDG roadmaps.

### **Investing in the SDGs**

Participants noted that equal access to COVID-19 vaccines is imperative for a sustainable recovery that leaves no one behind. The current vaccination trajectory is skewed, however, towards developed countries who are able to secure adequate vaccines for their citizens, while developing countries lack the adequate fiscal space to address immediate COVID-19 health and socio-economic response needs. This situation needs to be addressed and rectified, including by considering COVID-19 vaccines a public good.

Many representatives suggested to **look beyond income levels and GDP** when considering financing needs of countries, and rather look at the vulnerability (and resilience) of countries to exogenous and systemic shocks, including climate change. Recovery efforts must entail a gender equality lens and women and girls must be at the center of the recovery and investments in SDGs.

Many participants lauded the **IMF Special Drawing Rights (SDR) allocation** as a liquidity boost for developing countries in their rebuilding efforts. One donor country pledged to increase its official development assistance (ODA) contributions to meet the growing need for development financing and urged other donor countries to honor their ODA commitments. Many speakers called for private sector incentivization towards scaling up investments in sustainable development. Domestic resources in developing countries could also be freed up through measures to curb illicit financial flows, capital flight and corruption, as well as through progressive taxation.

Some speakers recognized the exacerbation of debt unsustainability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with six countries having defaulted on their debt obligations in 2020, and 36 countries having been downgraded by the major credit rating agencies. These countries in particular need the support of the international community as they work towards rebuilding their economies and societies.

## **HLPF Ministerial Segment (13 – 15 July)**

### **Opening**

The President of ECOSOC opened the ministerial portion of the HLPF by noting that the ministerial segment was an opportunity to build the foundations for a global recovery strategy. International solidarity and cooperation were essential to building back better.

Highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on progress towards the SDGs, the Secretary-General, in his opening address, noted the adverse effects on unemployment, violence against women, poverty, and structural inequalities. It was apparent that unity of purpose and effective leadership are necessary to overcome the crisis and make progress on the 2030 Agenda. Outlining key components of a sustainable, resilient and green recovery, the President of the General Assembly called for inclusive and innovative finance systems, digitalization, closing the gender inequality gap and building back green.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan underscored the need for universal and affordable access to the COVID-19 vaccine, adequate financing, and addressing the structural and systemic deficiencies of the international financial and trade architecture. An acceleration of the economic recovery must be carried out simultaneously with prioritizing health, social and sustainable development, according to President of the Republic of Indonesia. The Chancellor of Austria warned against the risk of many being left behind in the global recovery effort. Incorporating the SDGs into national development plans and prioritizing actions such as reducing inequality and eradicating poverty could minimize that risk, according to the Vice President of Columbia.

Concluding the opening session, youth representatives delivered a passionate call to countries to act urgently to ensure affordable access to mental health services, providing affordable internet access for everyone, stopping all investments in coal, oil, and gas, and reinvesting that money into sustainable development.

### **Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)**

Forty-two countries presented their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Deputy Secretary-General introduced this part of the HLPF by outlining the main points raised in this year's countries' reports.

The VNRs were seen as a key tool for governments to identify actions and measures needed to deliver the 2030 Agenda and achieve the SDGs.

Countries emphasized that the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs provide an important framework for a systemic and holistic approach towards recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coherent, integrated and interconnected approaches, building on the inter-linkages among the SDGs were seen as critical to achieve the SDGs. Such approaches addressed the systemic impacts and future risks of pandemics and pressing environmental challenges, ensuring a green, inclusive, resilient recovery from COVID-19. Countries called for international solidarity and cooperation.

Countries noted many sustainable development challenges that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as poverty, slow economic growth, insecurity, and political instability. Countries highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced pre-existing obstacles to realizing the Goals and threatens to halt or obliterate further progress. Countries also underscored their efforts in promoting economic growth and decent work for all.

Some countries described how inequalities within and among countries had worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how vulnerable populations had faced the brunt of the negative socio-economic and health impacts. The pandemic has also reinforced pre-existing structural inequalities, widened existing gaps and accentuated systemic challenges and risks. The issue of equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for all was highlighted as an imperative to overcome challenges. Inequitable access was often referred to as an example of people in certain areas or vulnerable groups being left behind.

Countries described their efforts to make their economies more resilient to shocks, including through promoting quality employment and raising productive capacity and competitiveness. Countries also took measures to address violence against women, improve living conditions and eliminate poverty in rural communities. At the same time, measures to address inequality gaps are also part of national strategies. It was seen as important to reach out to populations who are often excluded and to reduce data gaps.

Countries also emphasized the need for coordination and collaboration at all levels of governance and a people-centered approach that targeted vulnerable groups in order to “leave no one behind”. One initiative reported was a comprehensive social protection system, which included support to people living with disabilities and other vulnerable people.

Gender equality was seen as key for a speedy recovery and a more just society. Nevertheless, progress towards achieving this goal has not been sufficient. Countries highlighted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls, underscoring the importance of budgets, laws and targeted initiatives for gender equality.

To contain the pandemic, some countries enforced strict lockdown measures, invested in mass COVID-19 testing, scaled up vaccination programmes and promoted awareness-raising. Other measures included enhanced provision of water and sanitation by the public health delivery system in informal settlements and rural communities. To respond to the socio-economic impact, some countries introduced economic stimulus packages, focused on enhancing employment, strengthening health systems and food security, harnessing technology, strengthening data management and caring for the vulnerable.

At this point, most countries have aligned their national development plans with the 2030 Agenda, facilitating policy coherence and integration. Laws and regulations have been further enacted to align the legal and regulatory framework with Agenda implementation. Some countries described a whole-of-society approach involving extensive consultations with stakeholders. Several countries illustrated the importance of SDG implementation through decentralization processes, localization of SDGs and international cooperation. Local level development is increasingly aligned with the SDGs and is addressed and included in national development planning toolkits to leave no one behind and to mobilize domestic resources.

During the VNR presentations, climate change and the transition to a green economy were among countries' top priorities. Climate change was seen a significant challenge to achieving the SDGs. Countries reaffirmed their commitment to the Paris Agreement and were making efforts to reduce carbon emissions, preserve natural environments and protect biodiversity. Some focused on environmental sustainability, biodiversity conservation and the adoption of laws for ecological transformation. At the same time, they also indicated that further measures need to be taken to address deforestation, drought and biodiversity.

Countries noted manifold sustainable development challenges, including unsustainable production and consumption patterns, greenhouse gas emissions, loss of biodiversity, and environmental sustainability. Some countries agreed that data limitations remain a key obstacle to the achievement of the SDGs since the limitations affect policy formulation.

With regard to peace, justice and strong institutions, countries focused on governance and improving access to justice, including through the strengthening of institutions and laws for crime prevention and the promotion of human rights.

Other initiatives highlighted included sustainable agriculture initiatives focused on improving land and water usage; climate smart agricultural innovations; promotion of women's participation in agriculture and agro-processing industries, as well as food security programmes and green schemes. Further initiatives included country-wide early childhood development and increased use of ICT for education to enhance e-learning in schools and tertiary institutions, infrastructure development in rural and urban areas and initiatives aimed at energy efficient and renewable energy. Another initiative focused on strengthening local resource mobilization for the SDGs through harnessing diaspora remittances and upscaling loan schemes, grants and foreign direct investments, as well as combatting corruption to eliminate illicit financial flows.

Countries shared the view that development cooperation, humanitarian assistance and transformation policy are essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda. At this juncture, countries called for an effective and fair multilateralism, which is firmly anchored in a rules-based international order. The current context was seen as an opportunity to strengthen multilateral efforts in building back better for people and nature, guided by global solidarity and joint action to advance progress on achieving the SDGs

Some presenting countries stated the importance of financing instruments going forward to assist countries in achieving the SDGs. Countries also emphasized the critical role of partnerships (SDG 17), involving the private sector and various stakeholders in promoting the SDGs and ownership through local sustainable development platforms.

Countries encouraged the role of civil society, especially in the VNR process. Some countries undertook a highly participatory and inclusive approach. Countries expressed commitment to a whole-of-Government and a whole-of-society approach in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs. Support from the UN system entities in the VNR process was also acknowledged.

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## Annex: List of VNR countries

1. Afghanistan\*
2. Angola
3. Antigua and Barbuda
4. Azerbaijan\*\*
5. Bahamas\*
6. Bhutan\*
7. Bolivia
8. Cabo Verde\*
9. Chad\*
10. China\*
11. Colombia\*\*
12. Cuba
13. Cyprus\*
14. Czech Republic\*
15. Democratic People's Republic of Korea
16. Denmark\*
17. Dominican Republic\*
18. Egypt\*\*
19. Germany\*
20. Guatemala\*\*
21. Indonesia\*\*
22. Iraq\*
23. Japan\*
24. Lao People's Democratic Republic\*
25. Madagascar\*
26. Malaysia\*
27. Marshall Islands
28. Mexico\*\*
29. Namibia\*
30. Nicaragua
31. Niger\*\*
32. Norway\*
33. Paraguay\*
34. Qatar\*\*
35. San Marino
36. Sierra Leone\*\*
37. Spain\*
38. Sweden\*
39. Thailand\*
40. Tunisia\*
41. Uruguay\*\*
42. Zimbabwe\*

8 first timers, 24 second timers\*, 10 third timers\*\*