



Heard at the 2020 UN High-level Political Forum

By Barbara Adams, Carter Boyd and Karen Judd

“The world is going through a public health crisis which is turning into a global economic and social crisis. The HLPF is one of the first major intergovernmental meetings with universal participation and broad stakeholder engagement since the onset of the crisis.

“It is critical that the United Nations send a strong message to all people demonstrating that we can forge consensus and give a multilateral response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that we are committed to rebuilding better after the pandemic, with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as our roadmap. Countries, societies, youth and the media will all be looking to the United Nations for its guidance.”

How did the 2020 HLPF, which met 7-17 July 2020 in virtual format, respond to these words from the ‘presiding officer’, the President of ECOSOC Mona Juul, who said in her concluding remarks: we “cannot revert to the old normal...normal was part of the problem--all of our discussions have underlined recovery presents a rare opportunity to shape the new normal”.

Here are some of the voices heard at the 2020 HLPF, reverberating around the themes of building back better, leave no one behind, COVID-19, inequalities, data and accountability.

Building back better risks going backwards

- We cannot go back to normal. Normal is what got us into this mess, but also this financial crisis and climate crisis... [and] weakened state capacity after decades of hollowing it out through ... austerity, outsourcing, and privatization. -- Mariana Mazzucato, UN CDP
- The reality is that we have a lot of challenges achieving the world we said we wanted in 2015 and we are actually backtracking. We need solutions that include the informal labor sector, debt relief, and agricultural development. -- Alice Kalibata, Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)
- I’m tired of hearing building back better. What is better? We need to build back differently, with more diversified economies that are greener, more inclusive. Who are we building back better for? Big economies, for profit, and big business, or for sustainable development? – Isabelle Durant, UNCTAD
- Building back better for SIDS is not going back to what they had. When we were encouraged to diversify our countries and markets, we took what we were really good at and exchanged it for something else, not a true diversification. — Sharon Lindo, Belize
- To build back better we need to foster an open and innovative dialogue with a comprehensive and inclusive financing for development system to address the challenges MICs are facing. -- Philippines
- ...align the build back better principle in the context of sustainable financing strategies through increased liquidity, concessional financing and debt swaps. -- Armida Alisjahbana, UN ESCAP

- As we join online conversations like this, vulnerable populations are not at the table and are unable to participate. To build back better the world must focus on improving digital access, not a digital dream world that excludes those most vulnerable. — Elenita Dano, ETC Group

Leave No One Behind < Addressing inequalities

*Leave no-one behind has become the official slogan of the 2030 Agenda and the HLPF. Multiple statements of efforts to be inclusive, while welcome, are pro forma, selective and neglect many disadvantaged groups - and ignore the dynamics, policies and practices that **push** many behind.*

- Rich countries and corporations are pushing everyone else behind....'leave no one behind' is SDG-washing. --Winnie Byanyima, UNAIDS
- Most voluntary national reports [in 2019] mention leave no one behind (45 of the 47) but it's the depth of that principle we are concerned about with only 7 recognizing what policies might be pushing people behind. -- Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, UN CDP
- When the system fails, we see that those most vulnerable will suffer most. This is why inequality is at the center of the 2030 Agenda. It's at the intersection of economic, social and environmental constraints. We risk seeing a new generation of inequalities around digitalization and climate change in the European consensus on development. -- EU and EU member states
- This pandemic will result in millions more cases of gender-based violence. We don't have to let this happen. — Natalia Kanem, UNFPA
- Latin America is the most unequal region of the world and the efforts made to decrease poverty are now at risk of receding.... The health crisis has shown us that universal access to healthcare services is only part of the challenge. The lack of jobs, gender inequality, lack of social protection systems, education, environmental problems all have a direct impact of increasing the level of poverty worldwide. We believe acting in silos will return us to the 'business as usual' scenario.... For Mexico...our priority is to address the needs of vulnerable groups, with more intersectoral and multilateral responses. ...In doing so, the government has partnered with the private sector and out civil society. -- Camila Zepeda, Mexico
- We may end up with more inequality.... Gender equality is a prerequisite to build back better. --- Erna Solberg, Norway
- The VNRs show the main strategy of governments to address leaving no one behind is social protection. They stress violence against women but rarely unpaid work and childcare. -- Roberto Bissio, Social Watch
- Young people pointed to the longstanding inequalities among and within countries, as well as continued gender-based violence, ethnic and racial discrimination, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and other types of minority targeted policies that contradict values of dignity and human rights. Young people also expressed their need to recognize diversity in languages, cultures, indigenous knowledge and heritages that enrich our humanity. -- Jayathma Wickramanayake, S-G's Envoy on Youth

COVID-19: New crisis or systemic failure?

- The COVID-19 pandemic actually puts the principles of multilateralism and multi-stakeholderism to the test because the principles, among others talk about the need for a strong public sector, for strong government, and for a strong state. -- Geraldine Joslun Fraser-Moleketi, UN CEPA
- COVID-19 has exacerbated the systemic risks and fragilities in our economic and financial systems and development models. It has also highlighted the cascading impact of disasters crossing economic, social, environmental, dimensions of sustainable development, and affecting all countries, especially developing countries. — Munir Akram, Pakistan
- Inequality and climate change are driving the agenda backwards – COVID-19 builds on both drivers. — UN CDP Communique
- The landscape has changed significantly since we last met in 2019, and it is clear that COVID-19 presents a significant challenge to achieving the SDGs. But our message is that we must not be consumed by the challenge alone we must use this as an opportunity to rebuild better. — James Roscoe, UK
- The COVID-19 pandemic is a global shock that has exacerbated existing challenges and created new vulnerabilities for middle-income countries, setting back progress and development gains made during the past years. Recent data generated by various UN entities and reflected in the S-G Policy Briefs have highlighted that the substantial drop in remittances, loss of full-time employment, loss of employment in the informal sector, debt risks, pressure on health systems and food security due to the pandemic are specifically being felt in, and will acutely impact, middle-income countries. -- Philippines
- COVID-19 comes at a time when we were already off track to deliver on the 2030 Agenda, and at the time when we are backtracking on some issues, including hunger, inequalities, climate change, or biodiversity We need to propel our efforts towards first aligning both public and private finance with the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. Second, to promote sustainable investments and shifting finance away from fossil fuel. Third, to invest in the protection of biodiversity and natural ecosystems. And fourth, to strengthen regional and local supply chains while reducing their climate footprints. -- Cyrille Pierre, France
- If one piece fails, negative consequences are felt elsewhere in the whole system.... This time it has been health. Next time, it could be environmental degradation. We have agreed to a set of interlinked SDGs, and it's an opportunity to address issues in an integrated manner.... when the system fails, we see that those most vulnerable will suffer the most. This is why inequalities are at the center of the 2030 agenda.... We risk seeing a new generation of inequalities around digitalization and climate change. -- EU and EU member states
- COVID-19 has exposed the hardship of the informal economy, care workers and the need for adequate universal social protection. ... Respect for workers' rights must be at the center of the recovery, and that new transformative agenda for gender equality is urgent. Ratification of the new ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment should be a priority. Involvement of trade unions and not only business is required. -- Sweden
- The 2030 Agenda must not be another victim of the COVID-19. — Camila Zepeda, Mexico

Social protection to the fore

- To leave no one behind after COVID-19, we must ensure access to the health system and social protection as well as the quality food and nutrition for the poor. We must prevent increased prevalence of undernourishment and stunting. The greatest impact is through economic stimulus policy, a strengthened social safety net programme. – Indonesia
- Underinvestment in social protection has left many homeless. Countries in conflict are already struggling. Lower income countries need USD 50 billion in addition to the USD 100 billion to cope and overcome COVID-19. There is catastrophic destruction of gains made.
-- Rola Dashti, UN ESCWA
- COVID-19, has exposed the hardship of the informal economy, care workers and the need for adequate universal social protection.... Respect for workers' rights must be at the center of the recovery, and a new transformative agenda for gender equality is urgent. Ratification of the new ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment should be a priority. Involvement of trade unions and not only business is required... Maybe some global fund for social protection to ensure that you are leaving no one behind. -
- Sweden

The pandemic and the SDGs put multiple commitments to the test, not least how we measure progress, how we define poverty and how we underplay or ignore potential existential threats and growing inequalities.

Who measures what? What data counts?

- [There is] limited attention on a need for disaggregated data, where work on reducing inequalities really begins...Two very important goals are going in the wrong direction: Inequality and Climate Change. When they go backwards, they compromise all the other SDGs. – Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, UN CDP
- We do not have the right indicators – care work implies health and education, thousands of caregivers are dying but as unpaid household workers, not part of GDP – this presents a huge challenge to measure progress another way.... --- Roberto Bissio, Social Watch
- ...the importance of changing our classification ... if we stay within our traditional sort of GDP per capita definitions of the crisis we will not be addressing the countries. -- Vera Songwe, UN ECA
- Measures for GDP or human development do not tell our story and path. COVID-19 stopped the economy. Decades of global development and progress have been halted.... pay more attention to this notion of vulnerability. It's not about GDP per capita. What is our capacity to absorb new technology, composition of our population, levels of education and skills that allows us ... to really take advantage of the resources that we have? – Marsha Caddle, Barbados
- Getting the data right to guide policy responses will have life and death implications in this crisis and will support the SDG acceleration efforts over the coming decade. Therefore, investing into good, timely and disaggregated data and data and innovation at this point is urgently needed. -- Stefan Schweinfest, UN DESA
- [Data gaps] include new and emerging vulnerabilities, along with what we already typify as being risky poverty categories. We have to examine these, including workers who have lost their jobs in this experience, who already were precariously close, and those with low wages and as involuntary returned migrants and migrant workers. --Rochelle Whyte, Jamaica
- Education and the digital divide. Those without access have no access to schooling, this is a new educational divide. The 'digital equality paradox' means more people are more excluded.

Digital technology doesn't give us more equal access but furthers the divide. --Anriette Esterhuysen, Internet Governance Forum, South Africa

Partnerships?

- The partnerships that we do remain very critical. We need to strengthen the partnerships across governments and between governments, private sector development, foundations. Partnerships are going to need to be very structured. They need to be timely, very purposeful and sustained over the short to the medium term. — Rochelle Whyte, Jamaica
- Business can and should play a major role in reinvigorating multilateralism through inclusive business models and by demonstrating ethical leadership and good governance. ... Never before did so many different stakeholders, including business, have a seat at the table. The resulting SDGs offer companies a powerful blueprint for societal transformation and for business benefit... Growing numbers of companies awakening to the importance of responsible business.... — Sandra Ojiambo, UN Global Compact
- It is interesting to see that year after year the level of trust in governments and established institutions like church and media, et cetera, is decreasing whereas the expectations they are expressing with respect to companies and NGOs are increasing. ...Brands are now confronted with questions that ... touch upon very critical topics of living together, of society, of addressing common global challenges, racial injustice, social injustice, black lives matter. ...they realize that they don't have the level of trust and legitimacy to advise on policies and therefore they need partnerships with those entitled to have a view... And this is why partnerships, public-private partnerships are so essential. -- Stephan Loerke, World Federation of Advertisers
- In the post COVID-19 world, opportunistic multilateralism is just not good enough. Holistic and inclusive multilateralism at the UN is a vital component of a people-centric approach whereby international norms in relation to fair trade, sustainable development and human rights are given equal precedence to other global priorities....Civil society plays a key role in making people's voices count and ensuring no one is left behind. Enabling an environment for civil society where civic freedoms are respected are crucial to realizing the promise of the UN Charter. We look to the UN to protect and promote the rights of civil society, to maximize their contribution to peace, security and development. -- Julia Sanchez, Civicus

Policies, reporting and accountability don't end at the border

- COVID-19 exposed the limits and risks of the current markets and supply chains; risks of deepening the digital divide; environmental breathing space; momentum for debt forgiveness; and stresses how much we depend on each other and what we can do if we coordinate action. -- Isabelle Durant, UNCTAD
- We need a complete paradigm shift and a transformation.... we need to keep linking climate change, the biodiversity and the land degradation together. That is the heart of the sustainable development goals. - Yasmine Fouad, Egypt
- No country is on its own. Africa as a continent is affected by global imperatives, good or not ... Resilience alone without a holistic approach to well-being and broader development needs is counter-productive. -- Ibrahim Mayaki, NEPAD
- Many countries lack universal health care and social protection systems though it is these situations that lead to a route back to social/economic inclusion.... we need a fundamental post pandemic review

of fiscal policy, an international commission on fiscal policy for SDGs to improve progressivity of wealth including taxes and strengthen social health and protection systems. The current system undermines our ability to achieve the SDGs. – Paul Ladd, UNRISD

- ... universal Social Security and service systems and good educational opportunities for all are the key in preventing exclusion and before anybody has even time to think about the cost. Let me underline that this goes hand-in-hand with a broad based and effective tax system. -- Sofie Sandström, Finland
- Young people see the start of the Decade of Action as an opportunity to stop, to rethink or to dismantle systems of oppression, realign our values and enact meaningful structural reforms which will put in place the proper mechanisms to galvanize the UN Member States, private sector and civil society....Our main message across the board was that there must be no going back to normal....Many young people feel that the needs and rights of marginalized groups should be better represented given their unique vulnerabilities.
-- Jayathma Wickramanayake, S-G's Envoy on Youth

The HLPF continues to be among the most attended of all UN meetings, with broad participation from civil society and the corporate sector along with Member States. However, the quantity in participation has not been matched by the quality of policy commitments and actions from Member States to ensure the transformation needed.

Most Member States reporting on their progress to achieve the SDGs including in the VNRs focus exclusively on their domestic efforts and ignore their cross-border and global responsibilities. This is misleading in light of climate change, rising inequalities, debt crises, global pandemics, and the drivers of these challenges lie more heavily with the major economic players, public and private, while “those left behind” have little means of protection with the current rules of the multilateral game.

Member States have it in their power to correct these weaknesses by transforming the UN from a stage on which to perform to a political space in which to be held accountable.

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