

HIGH LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM 2022 WHITHER THE PROMISE OF THE AGENDA 2030



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K-8, Third Floor, Lajpat Nagar III, New Delhi - 110024 (INDIA)
Contact: +91 11-29841266 | pairvidelhi1@gmail.com | www.pairvi.org

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The HLPF 2022 was the 10th HLPF since it began with one session in September 2013 under the auspices of the UNGA. HLPF in its present form began taking shape after the adoption of the Agenda 2030 in 2015. However, since then (not withstanding nominal progress on few indicators), we have realized that with every HLPF that we are moving away from the central promise of the Agenda, to eradicate poverty and hunger and to make development inclusive and sustainable by creating synergy among the economic, social and environmental development. The covid 19 pandemic dealt an irrecoverable blow to the agenda, and majority of the countries agreed in the Ministerial Declaration last year that due to set back dealt by the pandemic, it's impossible to eradicate poverty and hunger and achieve the SDGs by 2030.

It was good that 2022 HLPF was organized in person after a gap of two years. The discussions and the annual GSDG Report 2022 helped to reiterate the gravity of the challenges Agenda 2030 faces in the wake of pandemic, economic and debt crisis, and rampaging impacts of climate change. Though one failed to hear so much on the conflict and wars beyond condemnation of Russia, which is a critical geopolitical reason fracturing not only multilateralism but also impacting human rights of hundreds of millions of people over the globe. Sessions on LDCs, LLDCs, SIDS and vulnerable MICs were helpful in bringing out challenges these countries faced to the fore and into the global consciousness. The emphasis on sub national reviews (besides national and local reviews) in the Ministerial Declaration was also desirable and overdue. However, these were insufficient to remove the dissatisfaction of the CSOs on the HLPF. Many of us believe that out of 3 major functions of the HLPF (i) to provide political leadership and guidance, (ii) to conduct in depth reviews to assess progress of the SDG, (iii) providing a platform to

countries to share their challenges and successes to enhance peer learning through VNRs, and (iv) providing concrete, concise, and action oriented recommendations through the Ministerial Declaration and its effective follow up, the HLPF is succeeded only in encouraging countries to volunteer to present the VNRs. However, 44 countries which presented the VNRs failed to enthuse the participants except few bright spots. The high income countries particularly failed to convince international community of their ambitions to act on the Red Alert warning of the SG by paying their climate debts. Adoption of the Ministerial Declaration by consensus (well almost) also again proved that the world is far from the global compact and solidarity, which helped it acclaim the Agenda 2030 in 2015.

What the HLPF was expected to respond to

The year has been critical as pandemic hit hard already derailed Agenda 2030 and people expected the UN and the HLPF to respond competently to the crisis and expedite recovery. 15 million people killed and 150 million infected by the virus does not reveal the economic and social distress that it caused. The moral failure of the international community and especially the rich countries could not have been more blatantly manifested than by the fact that one third of the humanity still awaits its first shot of the vaccine. The greed of the vaccine manufacturers and the manufacturing countries was on the worst display in the WTO MC 12 where countries responded with an insufficient and meek response to the cry for vaccine equity. Despite the efforts to make us believe to the contrary, hunger, poverty and inequality has been rising consistently since 2015. Pandemic added around 100 million people to extreme poverty. The ongoing war against Ukraine may add another quarter billion people as it continues disrupting food, fuel, fertilizer supplies.

The efforts for the recovery from the pandemic pales in front of the economic and debt crises that majority of the countries face and have to shell out more to debt service than on health and education. They have no fiscal or policy space to invest in economy and create more local demand. DSSI and Common Framework have pitifully failed to address the debt situation in LICs. Even with the SDRs reallocation less than 3% of the \$ 650 Billion went to the LICs (Bodo Elmers, GPF, 2022). LICs have to pay

a premium on the international debt as against rich countries which can borrow on near zero interest rates. The US Federal Reserve hiking interest rates twice in first two quarters made these loans further expensive for the poor countries.

Climate crisis worsening with each passing day completely matches or even surpasses other crises in terms of urgency of responses. The recently released WMO report warned that there is a 50% probability of the world breaching 1.5 degrees target (held by a thread by the Glasgow Compact) within 2015 at least for a year, implying that we are hurtling towards the crises in an unprecedented fast way. This probability was 0% in 2015. Two IPCC reports released early this year (WG III report on Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation in February and WGIV Report on Mitigation in May 2022) underlines that the Paris Agreement is not sufficient and 1.5 degrees is not safe for everyone. After a fall of emission in 2020, it rebounded with 6% rise in 2021. To save the target of 1.5 degrees, the emissions must peak by 2025, reduced by 43% by 2030 and become net zero by middle of the century. The emissions are likely to rise by 14% by 2030 instead. Even during the HLPF extreme heat waves engulfed much of the North America and Europe (besides China, India and Pakistan) killing 1700 people in two weeks only in Spain and Portugal and sending half of the Europe under the threat of the drought.

The previous couple of years have been characterized by increasing number of conflicts and wars, GSDG Report says maximum after 1946. Around a quarter of the global population is exposed to the impacts of these conflicts and hundreds of millions have been displaced. This put serious questions on the ability of the UN to carry its basic mandate of ensuring peace around the world and have serious implications on Leaving no one behind, the central promise of the Agenda 2030.

SDGs under the Review

five SDGs including SDG 4 on Quality Education, SDG 5 on Gender empowerment, SDG 14 on life below water, SDG 15 on Life on Earth and SDG 17 Means of Implementation were under review this year. It would be inadequate to call these two hour sessions as in depth review; however, these thematic sessions informed by the recent SDG Report put the challenges in the perspective by showing how far we are moving from

these goals. (Talk about framing in the last)

SDG 4:

The review underlined that 147 million children lost half of the instructions since the pandemic, 24 million children may never return to school again, digital divide exacerbating inequality in education as 50% do not have tools or internet access, and school closures from March 2020 to February 2021 extended from 40 weeks on average to peak in Latin America at 60 weeks (SDG Report 2022). We also heard some positive efforts like Sierra Leone spending 22% of the GDP on education, Ukraine educating its 3 million children virtually amid the war and Finland's free school meals etc. However, it was felt that the majority of the discussion remained centred around the primary education and digital divide. The participants lamented that the call of increasing investment in education (with a focus on private investment) also reiterated in the Ministerial Declaration failed to underline the need for more public investment in quality education which can be accessed universally, sine qua non for sustainable development. Lots of faith and expectations were also pinned on the "Transforming Education Summit" which will be organized during the 77th UNGA Session in September.

SDG 5:

The discussions highlighted the increasing burden and unpaid care work of women and diminishing decision making capacity, capacity to take decision on the sexual and reproductive rights and preferences as well a gender responsive budgeting. SDG Report showed that 26% of women (ever partnered) are subjected to intimate partner violence, which some estimated to rise of 45% during the pandemic. The report also underlined the exodus of women from work, women having only 39% of jobs accounted overwhelmingly for 49% of all job losses and that only 30% countries have legislations that protect rights of women to property or inheritance. During the HLPF the Women's Major Group (WMG) intensified its call to UN Women to end its partnership with the Blackrock alleging that the only purpose of the Blackrock, the investment behemoth, is to pinkwash its image. Women also called for reviewing SDG 5 every year.

SDG 14:

Increasing plastic pollution, acidification of oceans and overfishing centered the concerns on the life below the water. The UN report highlighted that last year 17 MT of plastics were dumped in the ocean and it might double or triple by 2040. It also reported that the number of observatories reporting increased acidification have grown from 170 to 300. Lot of praise was heaped for UN Ocean Conference and Our Ocean Conference and commitments made therein. Similarly, a lot of expectations were also pinned on UNEA 5 resolutions on internationally binding commitment on plastics and science policy panel on chemicals, waste and pollution. SIDS also hoped that the proposed Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) will put their challenges in the forefront and help them gain more financial resources to overcome those.

SDG 15:

SDG 15 discussion was marked by deforestation and rapid biodiversity loss, but also by increasing investment in biodiversity and nature based solutions. Speakers appreciated Glasgow pact on deforestation and expected a bold outcome from CBD COP 15 on post 2020 biodiversity framework. However, a caution needs to be raised on NBS as a number of CSOs demanded strong social and environmental safeguards in the NBS in the UNEA 5. It was preceded more protests from more than 200 CSOs and indigenous peoples organizations against the so called nature based solutions, which they allege, will lead to more environmental degradation, will fuel climate crisis and dispossession of the IPs.

SDG 17:

Partnerships, data, capacity building, digitalization, south south cooperation and leveraging private investment were discussed more than tax reforms, debt sustainability, financing SDGs, climate finance and the ODA. The OECD countries bragged about record ODA (approx.. 177 B) and FDI in 2021, however, the reality is that even EU countries contribution yet has reached less than half of the 0.7% of GNI committed around half a century earlier. EU by shortfall in its ODA causes a loss of Euro 26 B per year to the low income and developing countries. It also spends half of what it contributes towards the ODA in leveraging private

finance where the return ratio is less than 1 Euro per Euro invested (Bodo Ellmers, GPF, 2022). CSOs asked for deep reforms in global economic and finance architecture and therefore, too organize Fifth Financing for Development Conference.

Ministerial Declaration

Once again the Ministerial Declaration proved to be unworthy as an outcome of the HLPF. CSOs calling for a concise, ambitious, and action oriented Declaration to galvanize inclusive multilateralism and concrete way forward were deeply disappointed. In fact, Ministerial Declaration is seen as the weakest link of entire HLPF structure. In the ECOSOC and HLPF Reform consultations, many countries argued to junk it (Marianne Beisheim, 2021). This year too, a number of countries found it so unbalanced right from the beginning that the urge not to have a declaration became stronger. In personal conversations a number of delegation both from the developed as well as third world countries expressed their dissatisfaction both with the content as well as process of the negotiations on the Declaration. However, it may not be out of place here to underline that MD is important not only as the outcome from the HLPF but also as the only officially negotiated document from the entire ECOSOC cycle.

The Ministerial Declaration was finally acclaimed (by consensus) on the last session of the HLPF on 15th July. The para 76 on “...full realization of the right to self-determination of the people living in colonial and foreign occupation...” was voted upon where US, Canada and Israel voted against it. However, through out the negotiations traditional issues like language on sexual and reproductive rights, finance and climate finance etc. were hotly contested. However, it was also disappointing to say many countries objecting to language on rights which are supposed to have convergence since long. These included language on education, young and adolescent girls, migrants. A number of countries also objected to the language on “multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination” (used in the context of gender), and on “vulnerable MICs” as being alien to “agreed language.” The G77 countries in their statement in the last session also lamented on the lack of “CBDR” and “unilateral coercive measures.” The MD is becoming a place for much predicted agreed language vs. ambition,

and by becoming captive to agreed language, it becomes a matter of wordsmithing than moving forward and bringing in ambition.

In terms of substance, one failed to see anything new in the MD despite the declaration being longer than the Agenda itself. On the most important concern, SDG 17, the declaration could only ask for fulfilling old ODA commitments and climate finance promise of \$100 B. On debt resolution, it asked for restarting DSSI, expanding common framework and voluntary reallocation of the SDRs. In fact none of them will be helpful unless countries pay their climate debts, establish a global tax body and consider debt cancellation of the poor countries.

CSOs participation

Delays in official notification, registration and final programme etc. made the CSOs participation challenging. The MGOS responsible for ensuring presence of the CSOs was asked to invite CSOs for in person participation (in thematic discussions, VNR presentations and MGOS Official session) added to the challenge as interviews for US visa had a wait period of more than 180 days in majority of the countries. The VNR process of the MGOS which seeks to get speakers from the VNR country through a national process in each country inviting them to contribute towards a widely agreed CSO statement or questions to be asked during the VNR presentations, struggled to identify the speakers in short time and get them ready with the visa. The UN DESA coordinated with the US Mission which helped to get around 12-15 participants get visa just in nick of time. Funding to ensure travel support for the CSO participants has been a perennial issue at the HLPF and has found very few member states willing to contribute towards that. The thematic sessions also were too tight with a number of speakers, it seemed a parade of knowledge and experience rather than deep meaningful discussions. As a result, less than half of the listed speakers from the major groups could speak in the first week. CSO speakers are invited to speak only at the end after speakers and member states have spoken and therefore, always at the danger of falling off from the list should speakers or member states take more than their allotted time. These things call for attention, better coordination and more support for CSOs participation in the next years HLPF and the SDG Summit.

Conclusion

For the last two decades UNs dependence on private sector, big corporations and philanthropic foundations has been increasing. UN agencies having a target to get 30% expenses from untied and unearmarked member states contribution (known as regular or core budget) are finding it hard to meet the target. This has serious implications on UN's independence and its role. This drives UN more to partnerships with business and big corporates. This partnership though not new (since UN Foundation was set up in 1998), has been accelerated with SGs "Our Common Agenda (OCA)." OCA seems to take off ideas from the "Global Redesign" or "the Great Reset" of the World Economic Forum, in which it was argued that global governance is too big to be left alone to the governments, and therefore, Pvt sector and CSOs including academics should have equal role in the multi stakeholder global governance. The OCA centred around "networked and inclusive multilateralism" paves way to bring this idea to the ground. While the member states are envisioned to take decisions on multilateral issues; the participation modality puts member states, UN, Pvt sector and CSOs at the same plane, in complete denial of the power asymmetries among the various actors. This modality was experimented in the UN Food Systems Summit. It is likely to be seen more in the summits proposed in the OCA. The OCA also proposes that UN liaison with CSO should take place through the UN office of Partnership, which was created (around 2000 along with UN Global Compact) to attract private investment in UN programmes. It should concern all of us.



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