

## Summary of the Sustainable Development Goals Moment: 18 September 2020

Speakers at the 2020 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Moment described COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts as a “once in a generation chance to set things straight,” and stressed that the SDGs were potentially a “board to bounce back further and faster.”

“COVID-19 threatens decades of progress. But it is also an opportunity to do things differently, to imagine a better future, to harness humanity’s capacity for change and progress. Now is the time for bold choices,” UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed told the closing session. Many speakers also reiterated the need for global solidarity and the importance of multilateralism.

The SDG Moment was convened virtually by UN Secretary-General António Guterres to identify changes needed to recover better from COVID-19 and deliver the SDGs over the next decade. A “reality check” on progress on the SDGs was followed by a session on SDG gaps and plans, with interventions by 21 nominated Heads of State and Government. Contributions from stakeholders then addressed finance for the decade, climate solutions, and inequality.

The 2020 SDG Moment convened virtually on Friday, 18 September 2020 from 8:00 am-12:00 pm EDT (GMT-4).

### A Brief History of the SDG Moment

In September 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Summit adopted “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (2030 Agenda)—a package that includes the 17 SDGs, 169 targets, and a framework for follow-up and review of implementation.

The 2030 Agenda called on the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), established in July 2013 by UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution 67/290, to, *inter alia*, follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments. The UNGA resolution calls on the HLPF to meet under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) every year, and under the auspices of the UNGA every four years. Five HLPF sessions have taken place under the auspices of ECOSOC since the 2030 Agenda was adopted, most recently in July 2020.

The first session of the HLPF to convene under the auspices of the UNGA since the adoption of the SDGs, also called the SDG Summit, took place on 24-25 September 2019. UN Member States recognized that the world was not on track to achieve the SDGs and called on all actors to bring more ambition and urgency to their implementation efforts over the course of a

“Decade of Action.” The Political Declaration of the SDG Summit expressed concern in the following areas:

- progress is slowing in many areas, including poverty eradication, hunger, gender equality, and wealth inequality;
- biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, plastic litter in the oceans, climate change, and disaster risk continue at rates that bring potentially disastrous consequences for humanity;
- violent extremism, terrorism, organized crime, corruption, illicit financial flows, global health threats, humanitarian crises, and forced displacement of people threaten to reverse decades of development progress; and
- conflicts and instability have endured, or intensified, and natural disasters have become more frequent and intense in many parts of the world, causing untold human suffering.

The Declaration requested the Secretary-General “to organize an annual moment in the context of the general debate of the General Assembly to highlight inspiring SDG Action.” The SDG Moment is to take place annually during the high-level week of the UNGA each September until 2030, to highlight successes and identify where more action is needed.

### SDG Moment Report

Opening the virtual session, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said the 2030 Agenda is the “guiding light” to end the pandemic and respond to its socio-economic impacts, but a missing ingredient is political will. He outlined three priorities: improved financing; inclusive COVID-19 recovery plans; and raised political ambition.

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Noa Biran, Hackensack University Medical Center, called for political leaders to show the same empathy and collaborative spirit her colleagues and patients have demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Malala Yousafzai, UN Messenger of Peace, warned that while the pandemic is a setback, it cannot be an excuse for more of the political inaction that has characterized the five years since the adoption of the SDGs.

Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway and Co-Chair of the Secretary-General's SDG Advocates, said the pandemic must be addressed as a global challenge with a renewed commitment to multilateralism, and a vaccine must be developed collaboratively, to return to progress on the SDGs.

### ***SDG Reality Check***

Ola Rosling, Gapminder Foundation, described very slow progress in achieving the SDGs due to several reasons, including the failure to understand the interconnectedness of SDG targets, and the lack of data.

Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, described a rise in gender-based violence in the Arab region.

Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, said 60% of the population in the region lacks social protection, and 40% lack access to health care.

Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, highlighted that Europe is on track to achieve only 40% of the SDG targets.

Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, noted that Africa is facing its first economic recession in 25 years, due to COVID-19.

Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, reported that the gross domestic product in the region has contracted by 9%, and poverty is on the rise.

Achim Steiner, Administrator, UN Development Programme, described COVID-19 recovery efforts as a "once in a generation chance to set things straight" by investing in social protection and enhancing access to quality basic services, including universal health care. He urged leaders to: go beyond income to determine who qualifies for social protection; create fiscal space to invest in social protection, including by phasing out fossil fuel subsidies; and harness the power of digital solutions to scale up efforts.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director, UN Women, reported on widening gender poverty gaps, resurgent gender-based violence, and threats to girls' education and health. She called for bold policies to boost women's economic empowerment, including through: support for skills development; gender equality in science, technology and innovation; and services to support care to reduce women's workload and respond to gender violence.

Inger Andersen, Executive Director, UN Environment Programme, urged countries to consider global and national goals to deal with climate change in their recovery efforts, phase out fossil fuels, and invest in renewable energy. She described existing efforts, including the USD 20 billion investment in renewable energy by South Africa and efforts by several African countries to build the Great Green Wall bordering the Sahara Desert.

### ***SDG Gaps and Plans***

UNGA President Volkan Bozkır said at least 71 million people are being pushed into extreme poverty due to the pandemic; 270 million people face food insecurity; and the education of 1.6 billion children and youth is threatened. He described the SDGs

as a "board from which we bounce back further and faster" to build a more equal, green, and resilient world.

Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chair, African Union Commission, described the setback caused by COVID-19 to efforts towards meeting the SDGs in Africa and called for global solidarity, equity, justice, and humanity.

Interventions by UN-nominated Heads of State and Heads of Government followed.

**African States:** João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço, President of Angola, said prioritizing infrastructure, social services, health, and education can help mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

Mokgweetsi Eric Keabetswe Masisi, President of Botswana, described national efforts to turn the COVID-19 crisis into a "catalyst" for the implementation of the SDGs.

Muhammadu Buhari, President of Nigeria, noted that Nigeria had presented its second Voluntary National Review at the 2020 HLPF, and said the national statistical system has been redesigned to track progress on the SDGs.

Danny Faure, President of Seychelles, called for the inclusion of vulnerability into the criteria for measuring development, and for climate change to receive the same attention and sense of urgency as the pandemic.

Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa and Chair of the African Union, lamented that some countries are backtracking on existing multilateral agreements, stressing the SDGs are the only template for a transformative global agenda.

Saad-Eddine El Othmani, Prime Minister of Morocco, said USD 12 billion has been invested into national economic recovery plans, and called for the UN to create a special fund to support the implementation of the SDGs in Africa.

**Asia-Pacific States:** Michel Aoun, President of Lebanon, underlined the need for cooperation between UN bodies and national governments to strengthen the humanitarian-development response.

Tommy Esang Remengesau, Jr., President of Palau, called for the integration of efforts to protect oceans and address climate change into COVID-19 recovery efforts, to "build back bluer." He also called for an ambitious post-2020 biodiversity framework, that protects 20% of the world's oceans.

K.P. Sharma Oli, Prime Minister of Nepal, said Nepal has mainstreamed the SDGs into its national plans and programmes. He noted "significant progress" with regards to poverty reduction, food security, gender equality, energy access, and water and sanitation.

Tuilaeapa Sailele Malielegaoi, Prime Minister of Samoa, mentioned that Samoa has integrated the SDGs in its medium- and long-term budgeting, partnerships, and accountability plans. He underscored the need for debt relief and investment in increasing resilience to shocks.

**Eastern European States:** Salomé Zourabichvili, President of Georgia, highlighted the role of social protection packages in ensuring no one is left behind in national pandemic recovery plans. She called for the global partnership for development to remain at the center of international cooperation.

Stevo Pendarovski, President of North Macedonia, called for "coordinated reforms" in redesigning societies after the pandemic. He added that climate change remains North Macedonia's main challenge.

Borut Pahor, President of Slovenia, noted that Slovenia has made progress on almost all SDGs, especially with regards to poverty eradication. He mentioned that current national priorities include the circular economy and climate neutrality.

Boyko Borissov, Prime Minister of Bulgaria, said the COVID-19 crisis shows that international cooperation and the 2030 Agenda are "more relevant than ever."

**Latin American and Caribbean States:** Iván Duque Márquez, President of Colombia, highlighted national efforts to provide financial aid to more than 10 million families, and invest in digital connectivity to provide medical assistance and to guarantee that all students have access to digital education.

Lenín Moreno Garcés, President of Ecuador, described progress in implementing the National Development Plan 2017-2021, including in reducing the gender wage gap and maternal mortality, providing housing, and in the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labor market. He said 950,000 families received social protection as part of pandemic response measures.

Martín Vizcarra Cornejo, President of Peru, said a pact between the state and Peruvian society has guided measures to address inequalities and mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, including through a unified health system, quality education, economic growth, reforming the system for the administration of justice, and fighting poverty.

Nicolás Maduro Moros, President of Venezuela, described national efforts during the pandemic to provide food security to six million people, housing to three million people, state-funded education, and free medical care.

Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, highlighted the importance of addressing financing for development, and revisiting the criteria for countries, particularly middle-income countries, to access international funding.

**Western European and other States:** Alexander van der Bellen, Federal President of Austria, said the European Union is ramping up ambition on climate action through the European Green Deal, with a goal to make the continent climate neutral by 2050.

Sauli Niinistö, President of Finland, highlighted gender equality as a central component of sustainable development and described his work as Co-Chair in the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action.

### **SDG Opportunity – Contributions from Stakeholders**

SDG Advocates Eddie Ndopu and Hindou Ibrahim described challenges faced by vulnerable communities during the pandemic. Ibrahim said indigenous communities living in remote areas are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic due to the lack of information and lack of access to clean water to wash hands. Ndopu called for more intersectionality in policy-making and for advancing the discourse on social justice through the SDGs.

**Finance for the Decade:** Axel van Trotsenburg, World Bank Group, described increases in lending to least developed countries and middle-income countries, including an additional USD 7 billion to implement remote learning strategies for children in 65 countries.

Busi Sibeko, Institute for Economic Justice, called for human-centric macroeconomic policies, including an increase in interventionist policies, debt forgiveness, wealth and high-income taxes, combating illegal financial flows, and reform of international financial institutions.

Leila Fourie, Global Investors for Sustainable Development Alliance, said emerging market economies urgently need affordable funding to end the cycle of indebtedness.

Khalila Kellz Mbowe, Unleashed Africa Social Ventures Youth Disruption, said it is possible to create value while advancing sustainable development by creating programmes that connect young people and social enterprises.

**Climate Solutions:** Nisreen Al Sayeem, Climate advocate, Sudan, cautioned that the climate crisis has cascading effects on biodiversity. She emphasized that governments are not addressing the climate crisis despite the youth climate protests.

Brad Smith, President, Microsoft, said COVID-19 provides an opportunity to reimagine how to implement the SDGs. He noted

plans for Microsoft to expand its internal carbon tax; switch its data centers and offices to renewable energy; and become carbon negative and water positive by 2030.

Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, Mayor of Freetown, Sierra Leone, described plans to plant one million trees for flood mitigation and to expand water and sanitation, and said the COVID-19 crisis pushed local authorities to accelerate climate action, including through urban farming in informal settlements.

Christiana Figueres, Climate Action Champion and Convener of Mission 2020, said the biodiversity, climate, and inequality crises converge, so solutions should converge as well. She underscored the need to carefully deploy the resources made available for pandemic recovery for the benefit, not detriment, of future generations.

**Inequality Changemakers:** Natasha Mwansa, a journalist and health advocate from Zambia, mentioned that one of the greatest catalysts for sustainability is leadership, and leadership needs to be nurtured in the young generation. While stressing that intergenerational dialogues are important, she said that we need to move further towards intergenerational mentorship.

Danny Sriskandarajah, Oxfam, called for efforts to achieve the SDGs to be “supercharged” through bold measures, such as basic social floors to all citizens with richer countries contributing to a global fund for social protection to support those who lack adequate resources. He observed that COVID-19 represents an opportunity to overcome shareholder capitalism and share economic benefits more widely.

Hakima Abbas, Association for Women’s Rights in Development, called for long-term concerted commitments to women’s rights and gender equality.

### **Closing Segment**

In closing, ECOSOC President Munir Akram described plans to push for greater financing commitments through the ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development in the coming year and propose the establishment of a facility aimed at financing sustainable infrastructure in developing countries.

UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed said the first annual SDG Moment had “truly set the stage for the Decade of Action.” She noted five shifts required to resume progress on the SDGs: investments at scale; improving access to finance; greater and better use of data; strengthening intersectional approaches at various levels of governance; and inclusive decision-making to harness “big ideas and move forward in solidarity.”

The meeting closed at 11:56 am.

### **A Brief Analysis of the SDG Moment**

*A moment  
can recast the future  
or meekly fade away.*

The haiku “moment” is described as that split second when we first experience something, before we begin to think about it. It is a Zen snapshot, setting aside logic and thought for a flash of intuitive insight.

The SDG “Moment” ran well over a split second, and even its allotted time of three hours. In a snapshot, it told of humankind’s unwavering belief in our own ability to overcome crisis and adversity.

“We are in a global crisis,” Ola Rosling, President of “fact tank” Gapminder Foundation, told his virtual audience. “But we humans have the exceptional ability to imagine a better world, even during crisis, and we are capable of collaborating globally to turn that imagination into reality. I’m not saying this just to

comfort you in hard times. No, this is true, and the strongest evidence I know is the fact that the United Nations exists.”

### *Hope in the Face of Adversity*

Rosling and other speakers at the SDG Moment laid out the exact nature of the global crisis in a “reality check” based on limited data available so far (for 35 of the 169 SDG targets). For the first time in 30 years, human development progress is expected to reverse due to COVID-19. The pandemic has brought the first increase in extreme poverty and hunger rates in decades, with 12,000 deaths per day estimated by the end of 2020 due to hunger linked to COVID-19—potentially more than will die from the disease itself. Children are suffering from a lack of schooling, with the education of 1.6 billion children and youth threatened. Debt is skyrocketing while fiscal resources are plunging. Inequalities are growing. Progress on targets related to biodiversity and slum dwellers has regressed. Progress on inclusive economic growth, women’s representation in parliaments, and ending over-fishing is too slow.

There is a little good news—progress has been made on targets related to child survival, births attended by a trained health worker, access to electrification, internet, and cell phones.

If there was a flash of intuitive insight during the SDG Moment, it was this: the crisis may be extreme, but, in the words of UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner, it also a “once in a generation chance to set things straight.” And, as Rosling observed, we have already done the work on imagining a better world through the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

“The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is designed to address the very fragilities and shortcomings that the pandemic has exposed,” said UN Secretary-General António Guterres. “It provides the guiding light we need to end the pandemic, to respond to its socio-economic impacts, and to chart the course for a transformative recovery.”

However, one critical ingredient is still missing.

### *The Missing Ingredient*

Political will. In two words, the UN Secretary-General described the fly in the ointment.

While the 21 Heads of State and Government who spoke at the SDG Moment underlined their commitment to the SDGs, they were nominated by the UN to speak at the event since they have acted on the 2030 Agenda and could be on-message. They brought stories of hope and change, of actions to advance the 2030 Agenda while simultaneously dealing with the pandemic. Without exception, they called for global solidarity. Between the lines, however, their exhortations betrayed a deep concern for the current, weakened state of multilateralism.

Still, we can continue to hope, hinted Guterres. He emphasized that public appetite for transformative change is growing, as we can see in the leadership of young climate activists, in the global movements for racial and gender justice, and in the calls to end inequality. “The people are clear. There is no time to procrastinate.”

### *Big Ideas and Bold Action*

During the SDG Moment, stakeholders, as representatives of the people, called for big ideas and transformational change. They called for a basic social floor for all citizens, with richer countries contributing to a global fund for social protection to support those who lack adequate resources. They called for human-centric macroeconomic policies, debt forgiveness, and reform of international financial institutions. They called for an international summit on economic reconstruction and systemic reform to agree on ambitious responses to the pandemic and remove barriers to social and economic transformation. They also warned that we

can no longer miss the forest for the trees and must find joined-up solutions for joined-up problems, such as biodiversity loss, climate change, and inequality. They further saw opportunity in crisis, such as overhauling shareholder capitalism and sharing economic benefits more widely.

“Now is the time to make bold choices, take decisive action, and leave absolutely no one behind,” said Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed in closing.

The question is, will the spirit of human solidarity that led to the creation of the United Nations 75 years ago triumph once again?

## Upcoming Meetings

**75th Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA):** The UN will mark its 75th anniversary with a one-day high-level event on 21 September 2020 on the theme “The Future We Want, the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism.” **dates:** 21 September 2020 **location:** virtual **www:** <https://www.un.org/en/ga/>

**UN Summit on Biodiversity:** UNGA 75 will convene the UN Summit on Biodiversity under the theme “Urgent action on biodiversity for sustainable development.” Its aim is to provide political direction and momentum to the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. **date:** 30 September 2020 **location:** virtual **www:** <https://www.un.org/pga/74/united-nations-summit-on-biodiversity/>

**Beijing+25:** UNGA 75 will convene the UNGA High-level Meeting to Celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing, China, in September 1995. The theme of the meeting is “Accelerating the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.” **date:** 1 October 2020 **location:** virtual **www:** <https://www.un.org/pga/74/event/high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women/>

**5th Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA):** UNEA-5 will take place under the theme “Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.” Its aim will be to connect and consolidate environmental actions within the context of sustainable development and motivate the sharing and implementation of successful approaches. **dates:** 22-26 February 2021 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya (TBD) **www:** <https://environmentassembly.unenvironment.org/unea5>

**HLPF 2021:** The 9th session of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development will take place over eight days in July 2021 under the theme “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.” **dates:** TBC **location:** UN Headquarters, New York (TBD) **www:** <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>

For additional meetings, see <http://sdg.iisd.org>

## Glossary

2030 Agenda	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
ECOSOC	UN Economic and Social Council
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNGA	UN General Assembly