



The Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities for Sustainable Development

2021 High-level Political Forum Report

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A Snapshot of the 2021 High-level Political Forum

The High-level Political Forum (HLPF, or Forum) was held from Tuesday, 6 July through Friday, 16 July, 2021. This year's theme 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 HLPF is the United Nations global platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2021, the HLPF focused on Sustainable Development Goals 1 on no poverty, 2 on zero hunger, 3 on good health and well-being, 8 on decent work and economic growth, 10 on reduced inequalities, 12 on responsible consumption and production, 13 on climate action, 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and 17 on partnerships in depth. The Forum also considers the integrated, indivisible, and interlinked nature of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The [2021 HLPF Programme](#) covered a wide range of topics pertaining to the theme and the nine goals in focus. The HLPF began with a ministerial segment, and then heard member state presentations of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), followed by the high-level segment. Eleven VNR countries referenced persons with disabilities in their oral statements, and six VNR countries referenced the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.¹ In Member States' written VNR reports, 40 out of 42 had at least one mention of persons with disabilities. More information on these reports, and inclusive language throughout the HLPF, can be found in the tables at the end of this report.

Space for civil society and the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders, including the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities, was limited by the virtual format, the number of goals under review, and the number of countries undertaking VNRs. The [Annotated Programme](#) includes further descriptions of the thematic sessions and lists of speakers. For the first time, the UN provided an [HLPF programme in easy-read format](#).

¹ [Partners for Review 2021 Voluntary National Reviews –a snapshot of trends in SDG reporting](#), noting Chad, Germany, Guatemala, Nicaragua, the Niger, and Tunisia referenced the CRPD.

Accessibility at the HLPF 2021

This year was the first time that the UN produced [an easy-to-read programme](#) for the HLPF. Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) services were provided for all meetings from 6-16 July. Additionally, International Sign interpretation was provided for meetings on 6 July and 12-16 July.¹ UNDESA created an [accessibility guide](#) for participants that included days and times CART services and International Sign interpretation were available. Additionally, UN WebTV aired the plenary sessions at the HLPF that included CART and International Sign interpretation.

Some Member States also included captions during their VNR presentations, including: Chad, Japan, Thailand, and Zimbabwe. Namibia included national sign interpretation in a video used during their presentation. The inclusion of captions and sign language in VNRs and other Member State presentations shows dedication to the 2030 Agenda's principle of Leave No One Behind.

Reasonable accommodations were provided to presenters with disabilities. Additional time was provided for presenters with disabilities and the organizers worked to support presenters with disabilities to have full access to the online platforms and support, if needed.

SGPwD Involvement in Advance of the HLPF

The Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities for Sustainable Development (SGPwD) is the focal point for United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the General Assembly (GA) for all UN Sustainable Development policies. The responsibility of the SGPwD includes the Rio+20 outcome (including the 2030 Agenda), Sustainable Development Goals, High-level Political Forum, and Financing for Sustainable Development at the global and regional policy processes of the United Nations. In addition, the SGPwD aims to cooperate closely with other constituencies linked to other UN policy processes. It is a recognized group of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders Coordination Mechanism.²

Co-facilitated by the International Disability Alliance, the International Disability and Development Consortium, Disabled People's International, and other groups, the SGPwD coordinates inputs into sustainable development processes from persons with disabilities and their representative organizations and allies, demonstrating a high level of engagement with intergovernmental processes at the UN. The SGPwD aims to enhance opportunities for persons with disabilities, their representative organizations, non-governmental and other organizations working for the rights of persons with disabilities to advocate with a unified voice for inclusion of persons with disabilities in all sustainable development-related UN processes.³

The vision of the SGPwD is a world in which human rights articulated by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) are upheld, and sustainable development inclusive of persons with disabilities is achieved. With these objectives, persons with disabilities, their families and representative organizations meaningfully participate in all decision-making processes regarding

² Terms of Reference for the United Nations' Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities The space for persons with disabilities in the United Nations; March 1, 2017

https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/sgpwd_tor_1_march_2017_final.pdf

³ Ibid.

sustainable development. This includes the planning, design, implementation, monitoring, review, and evaluation of sustainable development policies at all levels– local, national, regional, and international.⁴

The SGPwD mission, as a self-organized space, is to ensure the effective coordination of the participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in United Nations processes related to sustainable development. It strives to ensure diversity and inclusion of all persons with disabilities, considering all types of disability and including the most marginalized groups within the disability movement. The SGPwD seeks to ensure the right to participation of all persons with disabilities in decision-making processes outlined in CRPD Articles 4.3, 32.1 (a) & 33.3⁵ and to bring to life the disability movement’s principle of “nothing about us without us.”⁶

The SGPwD held multiple meetings in preparation for the HLPF in 2021 on a monthly and ad hoc basis. It used these meetings to manage nominations for panelists and interventionists at various sessions during the Forum, to discuss substantive topics of the HLPF, and to plan and to host webinars ahead of the Forum.

In 2021, SGPwD hosted a [4-part webinar series](#):

- Webinar Series Part 1: Organizations of persons with disabilities and data on 24 February, 2021
 - A moderated discussion on the role of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in data processes with a focus on key experiences and research findings from national and global levels
- Webinar Series Part 2: An overview and discussion on SDGs 8, 10, and 16 on 6 April, 2021
 - A moderated panel discussion with an in-depth focus on SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions. The panelists delved into the effects of COVID-19 recovery for persons with disabilities within the scope of those specific goals
- Webinar Series Part 3: An OPD discussion on the Regional Forums on 25 May, 2021
 - A moderated discussion on the experiences of organizations of persons with disabilities at the UN regional forums
- Webinar Series Part 4: SGPwD-led COVID-19 research findings from Bangladesh, Bolivia, and Nigeria on 22 June, 2021
 - In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities carried out two phases of qualitative research to gather information on the experiences of persons with disabilities. The first phase of research took place in 2020 with disability movement leaders from around the world, and the second phase followed in 2021 exploring three countries in depth: Bangladesh, Bolivia, and Nigeria conducted by researchers with disabilities. This webinar presented the findings of this

⁴ Ibid

⁵ CRPD Article “4.3 In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations”; and CRPD Article “32.1 (a) Ensuring that international cooperation, including international development programmes, is inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities; 33.3 Civil society, in particular persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, shall be involved and participate fully in the monitoring process.”

⁶ Terms of Reference for the United Nations’ Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities The space for persons with disabilities in the United Nations; March 1, 2017
https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/sgpwd_tor_1_march_2017_final.pdf

research from the researchers' perspectives.

SGPwD Involvement at the HLPF

During the first week of the forum from 6 July to 9 July, multiple speakers gave interventions during thematic sessions on behalf of the SGPwD, and it hosted a side event on Building an Inclusive & Effective Path for Civil Society Engagement in the HLPF, attended by 82 participants. The SGPwD also had a panelist in the formal civil society session that is a part of the HLPF programme each year. These interventions were made with excellent geographic representation from various organizations of persons with disabilities.

On 6 July, Sylvana Lakkis from Disabled Peoples' International representing the SGPwD presented a statement during the session [The SDGs in Time of Crisis: A sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from Covid-19 as an opportunity to realize the SDGs](#). Ms. Lakkis made a strong point on the importance of the inclusion of persons with disabilities as the world recovers from COVID-19: "For sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19, all governments must include persons with disabilities and their representative organizations at every stage of planning...it also just makes good sense; we know the most about how to make sure programmes are accessible and inclusive for a complete recovery that benefits all of society," she said. The moderator, Achim Steiner, UNDP Administrator, commented on this point, linking it to the situation in Lebanon, Ms. Lakkis' home country. Her statement [can be found in full here](#).

On 8 July, the SGPwD made interventions during two of the day's three sessions. Dwi Ariyani from [Disability Rights Advocacy Fund](#) represented the SGPwD in the morning session [SDGs in Focus: How do we get on track for building more peaceful, equal and inclusive societies \(SDGs 3, 10,16, 17 and interlinkages among those goals and with other SDGs\)](#). Ms. Ariyani raised how discrimination against persons with disabilities was magnified in the pandemic. "Barriers to our access justice to justice are further amplified by stigma, lack of accessible justice facilities, and restrictions on our exercise of legal capacity such as guardianship, contravening the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We cannot challenge discriminatory health access in court if laws do not recognize our legal personhood," she said. Ms. Ariyani's statement [can be found in full here](#).

Mamadou Sissoko from Mali represented the SGPwD in a session with a regional focus on Africa, [Restoring the conditions for SDG progress in African countries, Least Developed Countries and Landlocked Developing Countries](#). Mr. Sissoko presented his statement in French and highlighted that "persons with disabilities often face barriers to access services, education, and employment. These barriers result in us being less likely to participate economically in society, leading to poverty and exclusion.⁷ This was the case before the pandemic, and today inequalities have increased for persons with disabilities. Indeed, policy decisions of governments, made without our active participation, increased our vulnerability and marginalization." His statement [can be found in full here](#).

Major Groups and other Stakeholders' Civil Society Session at the HLPF

On 9 July, the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) held the session [Vision and priorities of civil society, the private sector and major groups and other stakeholders: realizing the SDGs during the COVID-19 recovery](#). This session explored the vision and priorities of the MGoS on how to advance an

⁷ OHCHR. *Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Sustainable Development Goals NO POVERTY*. 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/SDG-CRPD-Resource/policy-guideline-no-poverty.pdf>

inclusive path to recovery, as well as possible reforms to strengthen the realization of political and social rights. The principle of “no one left behind” was a strong theme throughout this session. The discussion intersected with other crucial agendas, such as those relating to the rights of persons with disabilities, gender equality, the rights of older persons, the fulfilment of human rights, and the removal of systemic barriers to socio-economic transformation. The discussion re-affirmed the holistic integrity of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Guiding questions for the panelists included:

- What are the broader impacts of the shrinking of civil space during the pandemic in the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and their human rights dimensions?
- What challenges are faced by the plurality of actors in the civic space, in the context of the pandemic and post-recovery, with regard to the right to meaningful participation in global, regional and national agendas?
- What are the collective commitments needed at all levels to ensure an inclusive and plural process for the implementation, monitoring and review of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, with the aim to overcome systemic barriers and ensure gender equality, intersectionality and a holistic approach bearing in mind crosscutting issues?

Dr. Ruth Warick, First-Vice-Chair of the International Disability Alliance and President of the [International Federation of Hard of Hearing People](#) presented on behalf of the SGPwD. Ruth focused her remarks on the right to participation for persons with disabilities, as it entails the meaningful consultation with and involvement of persons with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the development and implementation of policies and programmes to realize sustainable development.

Article 32 of the CRPD⁸ addresses international cooperation, recognizes the importance of partnership between states parties and civil society, and in particular organizations of persons with disabilities. It calls for States to ensure that international cooperation, including international development programmes, are inclusive of and accessible to persons with Disabilities. “Human rights are indivisible and interrelated, as are the Sustainable Development Goals. Participation is necessary element for the success of both. Dr. Warick concluded with the powerful statement that “persons with Disabilities must be meaningfully involved in all stages of the decisions that affect us for no one to be left behind.”

SGPwD Side Event at the High-level Political Forum 2021

On 9 July, the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities hosted an official event at the HLPF. The theme was “Building an Inclusive and Effective Path for Civil Society Engagement in the HLPF.” It toured the insights of a global panel of speakers from organizations of persons with disabilities. The event was moderated by José Viera, CEO of the World Blind Union and Permanent Representative of the SGPwD. Additionally, there were presentations from panelists focused on current efforts and future opportunities for persons with disabilities in the HLPF and other international fora.

In the first half of the event, panelists discussed the current situation of civil society and DPOs’ involvement in HLPF processes. During this session, Dr. Mohammed Ali Loutfy Executive Director of Disabled People’s International (DPI); Senior Advisor on Capacity Building and Advocacy, G3ICT; and Alternative Representative of the SGPwD discussed inclusive and effective partnerships. Dr. Loutfy

⁸ Article 32 of CRPD

emphasized that “A key aspect of partnership is ensuring that representative organizations of persons with disabilities have a leading role at the table.”

Dominique Kantor from Inclusion International discussed increasing work on intersectionality, and the importance of accountability, because “to solve everyone's problems it is not useful to seek solutions only for some.” Ms. Kantor highlighted that to ensure no one is left behind, intersectionality must be recognized, especially as the world recovers from COVID-19.

The event also focused on future opportunities. Martyna Balciunaite of the European Union of the Deaf, reported on organizations of persons with disabilities’ engagement at the UNECE Regional Forum, particularly securing accessibility for deaf participants. “We highlighted specifically ... that accessibility is an obligation. It is not a choice.” Sainimili Tawake from Pacific Disability Forum discussed persons with disabilities’ engagement in these and similar high-level spaces. “(W)e learned that for us to effectively engage and to effectively communicate, ... We have to provide [persons with disabilities] with tools.”

Paula Hearn of the International Disability Alliance wrapped up the panel with the important distinction between inclusion and meaningful participation. “It is one thing for persons with disabilities to be invited to the table, but another to be meaningfully included & consulted in all phases of a process,” she said. The SGPwD will continue to advance the participation of representative organizations of persons with disabilities with each successive HLPF.

Voluntary National Reviews

The [Voluntary National Reviews \(VNRs\)](#) aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The VNRs also seek to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Countries participating in VNRs are expected to submit comprehensive written reports that will be made available in a [VNR database](#) on the UN’s website. In addition, each VNR country also provides [main messages](#) summarizing their key findings.

In 2021, 42 countries carried out voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of their implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bahamans, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Island, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Norway, Paraguay, Qatar, San Marino, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay and Zimbabwe.

In Member States’ written reports, 40 out of 42 had at least one mention of persons with disabilities. Many countries orally presenting their VNRs discussed “vulnerable” groups and leaving no one behind in recovery from COVID-19. Twelve out of 42 VNR presenters mentioned persons with disabilities. At the time of release of this report, the [Bahamas](#) and [Guatemala](#) had not yet made written reports available. Combining all mentions of persons with disabilities, there were 1302 total mentions. Included here are a few selected references from the oral presentations. Please refer to Tables 1 and 2 for specific counts of references in each written and oral presentation.

Azerbaijan reported that “implementing SDGs in Azerbaijan is based on the principle that no one should be left behind, including the elderly and disabled persons, children and youth.” The UNECE posed a question to Azerbaijan on addressing inequalities youth with disabilities face in accessing education, including resources, technology, quality secondary opportunities, and transitions from education to employment. Azerbaijan responded that they are doing their “utmost to create real opportunities for all, including people with disabilities, on the basis of equality.” Persons with disabilities are referenced many times in [their written report](#) on many topics, in particular, education.

Guatemala presented its third VNR. Their presentation included a video showing consultation of a coalition of persons with disabilities. One of Guatemala’s priorities is to integrate the SDGs into national goals. They also emphasized the importance of access to information for all. Guatemala was also one of the six VNR countries that referenced the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.⁹

Presenting their second VNR, Namibia was one of a few Member States to include national sign language interpretation in their video presentation. Namibia emphasized its “significant shift in human development” with its comprehensive social protection programme that inclusively supports people with disabilities. Both in their oral presentation and [written report](#), Namibia reported prioritizing the empowerment of persons with disabilities. Namibia shared that “tremendous progress in ensuring gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as well as people with disabilities has been a priority, where interventions such as...employment equity are being undertaken.” This indicates progress from Namibia’s 2018 VNR. In response to the stakeholders’ questions (delivered [for the first time in International Sign](#) at an HLPF), Namibia stated that while Namibia may not have a history of including persons with disabilities, there are serious efforts underway to do so.

Ministerial Declaration of the 2021 HLPF

The [Ministerial Declaration](#) is the final negotiated outcome document of the HLPF. Negotiations began in April, 2021. It was adopted by consensus, however Member States voted on paragraphs during the final session, and a number took reservations afterward, which undermines the spirit of consensus. Through the negotiations, the divergent priorities emerged on climate change, the TRIPS waiver, health care services, financing and debt, biodiversity, and countries in special situations.¹⁰ The SGPwD sought the inclusion of persons with disabilities’ participation in decision making, universal social protection, the prohibition of discrimination, access to services in COVID-19 response, and vaccination prioritization, as well as explicit recognition in disaggregated data. The Stakeholder Group recommends the Washington Group short set of questions and the Washington Group and UNICEF Child Functioning Module to measure the SDGs and to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities.

The [Ministerial Declaration](#) includes references to persons with disabilities in the context of inequality and access to basic services; and recognition that persons with disabilities are among the poorest and most marginalized people affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Paragraph 18 of the Declaration states “{...} We will ensure that people everywhere have access to basic services, including persons with disabilities,

⁹ [Partners for Review 2021 Voluntary National Reviews –a snapshot of trends in SDG reporting](#), noting Chad, Germany, Guatemala, Nicaragua, the Niger, and Tunisia referenced the CRPD.

¹⁰ IISD, Governments Lack Consensus on HLPF Outcome Document, 13 July 2021, <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/governments-lack-consensus-on-hlpf-outcome-document/>

who often lack access {...}.”¹¹ Paragraph 24 states that “We will undertake every effort to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first. Those whose needs are reflected in the 2030 Agenda include all women, children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, local communities, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants.”¹²

Other references relevant to the work of the SGPwD include references to vulnerable groups.¹³ This is often referenced in the context of COVID-19, providing social protection measures, and ensuring no one is left behind to achieve the 2030 Agenda. The term stakeholder¹⁴ is used to refer to partnerships and collectively working toward the goals. Persons with disabilities are also included under the umbrella term “all relevant stakeholders.” Civil society is referenced in only two paragraphs,¹⁵ in the context of working in collaboration with Member States and United Nations entities.

Conclusion

This year’s High-level Political Forum on recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that many people are still being left behind. Challenges to civil society space, and the limitations of virtual platforms were formidable. The Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities, organizations of persons with disabilities and allies, and other civil society organizations are dedicated to continuing to ensure the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Tables

Table 1: Mentions of Persons with Disabilities in VNRs

Country	Oral Presentation:	Written Report:
Afghanistan VNR 2021		19
Angola VNR 2021		23
Antigua and Barbuda VNR 2021		35
Azerbaijan VNR 2021	Yes	51
Bahamas VNR 2021	N/A	N/A
Bhutan VNR 2021	Yes	10
Bolivia VNR 2021 (Spanish)		6
Cabo Verde VNR 2021		12
Chad VNR 2021 (French)		9
China VNR 2021		5
Colombia VNR 2021 (Spanish)		11

¹¹ Ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the 2021 session of the Economic and Social Council and the 2021 high-level political forum on sustainable development, convened under the auspices of the Council, on 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”

¹² Ibid

¹³ Paragraphs in the Ministerial Declaration: 14, 15, 24, 33, 34, 35

¹⁴ Paragraphs in the Ministerial Declaration: 10, 12, 14, 19 (2), 22, 27, 32, 37, 40, 42

¹⁵ Paragraphs in the Ministerial Declaration: 22, 50

Cuba VNR 2021 (Spanish)		25
Cyprus VNR 2021		12
Czech Republic VNR 2021		9
DPR Korea VNR 2021	Yes	7
Denmark VNR 2021		54
Dominican Republic VNR 2021		25
Egypt VNR 2021		12
Germany VNR 2021		9
Guatemala VNR 2021	N/A	N/A
Indonesia VNR 2021		237
Iraq VNR 2021		14
Japan VNR 2021	Yes	42
Laos VNR 2021		46
Madagascar VNR 2021 (French)		15
Malaysia VNR 2021		12
Marshall Island VNR 2021	Yes	34
Mexico VNR 2021 (Spanish)	Yes	11
Namibia VNR 2021	Yes	7
Nicaragua VNR 2021 (Spanish)		38
Niger VNR 2021 (French)		22
Norway VNR 2021		29
Paraguay VNR 2021 (Spanish)		46
Qatar VNR 2021	Yes	53
San Marino VNR 2021		26
Sierra Leone VNR 2021		22
Spain VNR 2021 (Spanish)		72
Sweden VNR 2021	Yes	67
Thailand VNR 2021		19
Tunisia VNR 2021 (French)	Yes	60
Uruguay VNR 2021 (Spanish)	Yes	38
Zimbabwe VNR 2021	Yes	58

Table 2: Other Inclusive Language in Oral Presentations

Language	Thematic Sessions	Voluntary National Reviews
“Leave No One Behind”	7	7
“Vulnerable populations/groups”	20	22