We need to talk about inequality: A critical discourse analysis of UN member states' positions on inequality since the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals

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List of abbreviations

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CSD: Commission on Sustainable Development

G20: Group of 20

G77: Group of 77

HLPF: High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

LDCs: least developed countries

MDGs: Millennium Development Goals

MICs: middle income countries

NGO: non-governmental organization

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

SIDS: small island developing states

UK: United Kingdom

UN: United Nations

UNCED: United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

UN DESA: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

UN ECOSOC: United Nations Economic and Social Council

US: United States

VNR: voluntary national review

1. Summary

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established in 2015, provide an ambitious goal-setting framework for development. Goal 10 (reduce inequality within and among countries) seems to be a promising opportunity for fighting economic inequality; however, the goal remains ambiguous in its potential. This ambiguity can be explained by the different standpoints on inequality that nations took during the negotiations of the goal. This research aims to explore how nations have positioned themselves in the discourse on the topic of inequality since the introduction of the SDGs. Through a literature review, the context of global inequality dynamics in which the discourse is taking place is established, and the nations that took a strong position on inequality during the SDG negotiations are identified. Then, an expert interview is held to gain insight into how the discourse on inequality takes place and how it is documented. Finally, a critical discourse analysis is done for two reasons. First, to find the positions that nations take on inequality in the discourse since the establishment of the SDGs. Second, to interpret these positions in the context of the findings of the expert interview and literature review. From the analysis, it is found that while inequality is increasingly mentioned in the discourse, only 'developing' nations (Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mexico, Colombia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bangladesh) and two 'developed' nations with progressive economic policies (Norway and Sweden) consistently speak out against inequality or in favor of more ambitious policies to fight inequality (beyond the scope of SDG 10). In contrast, the 'developed' nations that spoke out against an ambitious goal on inequality during the SDG negotiations have since the introduction of the SDGs been silent on the topic of inequality, except for Norway and Cyprus. The results overall show that little change has occurred since the introduction of SDG 10, which is consistent with the lack of progress made in inequality reduction efforts worldwide. This reaffirms the division between 'developed' and 'developing' nations in the global inequality dynamics.

2. Preface

Since my early teens, whenever someone asked what I wanted to do when I was older, my answer would be 'I want to save the world'. How I wanted to do that, I didn't really know, but I knew enough things I wanted to 'save' the world from: poverty and climate change were my greatest concerns. This strong feeling of injustice, however naïve, has been of great influence on my academic choices. First in my choice to study Earth Science and Environmental Science in my bachelor's, with the ambition to become a climate scientist. Then in my choice for the research master Sustainable Development, as I became increasingly interested in the social aspect of climate change. During the program, lectures by Frank Biermann and Agni Kalfagianni became a major inspiration for my interest in the relationship between global environmental change and justice. The topic of inequality, with its far-reaching implications for economic as well as social and environmental justice (or, as Biermann and Kalfagianni capture it so well in their research, *planetary justice*) was a perfect starting point for my Master thesis to which I have eagerly dedicated myself the past year. I am very grateful for the opportunity to work out ideas for this thesis with my supervisor Frank Biermann and second reader Carole-Anne Sénit, and I want to thank them for their support, patience, and valuable feedback throughout the writing process.

3. Introduction

The year 2000 marked the beginning of an era of ambitious global goal-setting partnerships for international development. The new millennium started with the aptly named Millennium Declaration, a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) containing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): eight goals aiming to, among others, reduce extreme poverty by 2015. Significant progress was made in poverty reduction: the number of people living in extreme poverty declined by more than half, falling from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015 (UN DESA, 2016). However, many critiques on the structure and content of the eight goals emerged as well. The process of establishment of the MDGs was criticized for not involving developing nations enough and failing to address the root causes of poverty; the goals themselves were described as being too simplistic (McCloskey, 2015; Fehling, Nelson & Venkatapuram, 2013; Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Another critique on the MDGs was that progress was measured between 1990 and 2015, thus including 10 years before the goals were even introduced (Kenny & Summer, 2011). Impressive results on poverty reduction were mostly accounted for by China's fast economic growth during the 1990s, and disaggregation of poverty data showed that by 2015, poverty actually remains at similar if not worse levels in countries other than China (Hickel, 2016).

One of the root causes of poverty that the MDGs were failing to address was inequality (Anderson, 2016; Saiz & Donald, 2017). Since poverty reduction was at the core of the MDG agenda (Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011) and inequality often hampers progress in poverty reduction due to their complex interlinkages (Ravallion, 2001; Donald, 2017), this was considered counterproductive. Inequality reduction is even proven to have larger benefits for reducing poverty than economic growth (Lakner et al., 2019). Moreover, while some inequality might be conducive to economic growth, extreme inequality can have destabilizing

and detrimental effects, in an economic as well as political and social dimension (Thorbecke & Charumilind, 2002; Doyle & Stiglitz, 2014).

At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, plans were made for a set of goals that would be the MDG's successor. The set of goals was expected to build on the MDGs, but it was also expected the critiques on the MDGs would be addressed both in the scope and the inclusiveness of the new set of goals, during the negotiation process as well as in the goals themselves (Sachs, 2012; Fukuda-Parr, 2016). The resolution Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (from here on referred to as the 2030 Agenda) was finally adopted by the UNGA in 2015. The successors of the MDGs were named the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 17 goals for a "(..) better and more sustainable future for all" (UN, 2019), to be achieved by 2030. These goals promise a unique and novel way of steering in global governance (Biermann, Kanie & Kim, 2017).

In contrast to the MDGs, the SDGs did contain a goal on inequality: SDG 10 (Reduce inequality within and among nations). This goal became an opportunity to combat poverty more holistically and close the gap between extreme wealth and extreme poverty. In its establishment, moreover, it became the first time reducing inequality was recognized as a goal by nations worldwide (Kuhn, 2019; Biermann & Kalfagianni, 2020). This was not without controversy: of all the SDGs that were adopted, few were as widely debated during the negotiations as SDG 10. The negotiations of the SDGs consisted of thirteen rounds of formal discussions by the Open Working Group (OWG), a group of seventy interested UN member states (Bhattacharya, Khan & Salma, 2014). Some nations tried to keep inequality off the agenda, while others aimed to create an ambitious goal to combat all forms of

economic inequality (Fukuda-Parr, 2019). The formal outcome, in the shape of SDG 10, was a compromise between those opposing standpoints (Saiz & Donald, 2017).

The OWG process showed an interesting division in how nations positioned themselves on inequality, as well as in how they framed the concept of inequality. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the discourse on inequality has continued at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), the UN body that evaluates the SDGs every year. However, no research has yet been done to explore how this discourse on inequality evolved. Has SDG 10 made all nations align their position on inequality? Or have the divergent positions on the topic persisted, despite a shared goal? The potential of the SDGs ultimately lies in them becoming discursive resources (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016). In this thesis, therefore, I aim to contribute to the body of research on the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals by comparing the positions of nations on inequality before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda to how their positions have evolved since then. This will shed light on the ways in which nations participate in the discourse on inequality, especially when a strong position on the topic was expressed before the SDGs were introduced, and how this has changed.

Nations are certainly not the only ones that wield influence in the process of global policymaking; they increasingly share the policy arena with actors from civil society, other governmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Kamau, Chasek & O'Connor, 2018). However, they are still the main decisive power when it comes to international agreements such as the SDGs (Sénit, 2020). For that reason, this research will look at general trends in the discourse on inequality, but it will have a focus on the changing positions of nations.

The main research question is as follows: "How have UN member states' positions on inequality, especially compared between the nations that strongly opposed or supported a goal on inequality, changed since the introduction of SDG 10: reducing inequality?"

The sub-questions are:

1. What are the general trends in the discourse on inequality since the introduction of SDG 10: reducing inequality?

2. (How) has the position of nations strongly opposing or supporting a goal on inequality changed since the introduction of SDG 10: reducing inequality?

3. How do nations with strong positions on inequality relate to each other, and (how) has this changed?

In order to answer the sub-questions and the main research question, my research approach has three components. First, I review the literature to identify existing research on inequality and the 2030 Agenda. This is done to embed the discourse on inequality in the context of the global inequality dynamics, as well as to garner insights into motivations behind different positions on inequality. Second, I conduct an expert interview with Professor Pamela Chasek to gain insight into the institutional framework in which the discourse on inequality takes place, and into the processes that shape this discourse. Third, I study the discourse on inequality from 2016-2020 by analyzing the yearly meetings of the HLPF, as reported on by the Earth Negotiations Bulletin, an independent reporting service on international sustainability negotiations. I compare and analyze my findings across nations as well as over time. This analysis brings to light the positions of nations on inequality and the changes in these positions since the introduction of the SDGs, as well as how these positions relate to the global inequality dynamics.

4. Conceptual framework

In order to study the positions of nations on inequality, it is important to first define the concepts that are used throughout this research. I will therefore discuss the concept of inequality and how it is used in the context of the SDGs, as well as the classification of nations into a 'developed' or developing' category.

4.1 Inequality

Inequality in the broadest sense is the quality of being unequal or uneven. The inequality that is relevant to the SDG framework can be classified as social inequality: inequality in resources or social goods that exist between members of a society, be it on a global, regional, or national scale (Hurst, Gibbon & Nurse, 2016). There are several dimensions to social inequality (Neckerman, 2016; Gradín, Leibbrandt & Tarp, 2021), such as gender inequality, an issue that is garnering increased attention (Rosche, 2016) and also has its own SDG (Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls); political inequality; racial or ethnic inequality; and economic inequality. The different dimensions of social inequality tend to move together and reinforce each other (Binelli, Loveless & Whitefield, 2015). However, economic inequality is the most well-known dimension of social inequality and the type used in SDG 10 (Reduce inequality within and among nations). This research therefore limits itself to economic inequality. The distinctions within economic inequality relevant to the discourse on inequality of the HLPF will be discussed here.

Vertical inequality and horizontal inequality

Vertical inequality, also called inter-personal inequality, is the inequality that exists between all individuals or households (Ravallion, 2004). Horizontal or inter-group inequality on the other hand distinguishes groups based on factors such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age (Jayaraj & Subramanian, 2006). Horizontal inequality is often caused by discrimination, oppression, and marginalization (Stewart, 2005) and can best be addressed by addressing barriers that specific groups face (Stewart, 2010). To address vertical inequality, on the other hand, measures that affect the entire population must be taken, such as redistributive policies (Melamed & Samman, 2013).

Between-country inequality, within-country inequality and global inequality
Inequality data can be (dis)aggregated at different scales or in different groups. When looking at inequality within a country, this can say something about how the wealth of one country is distributed throughout its population (Bourguignon, 2015). This can be done on an individual level (vertical) or by studying sub-groupings based on metrics such as gender or ethnicity (horizontal). While there are more precise methods to measure inequality on an international scale, vertical inequality measured between countries often disregards the inequality within a country and instead takes the mean income of countries for comparison (Milanovic, 2011). Combining within-country and between-country inequality to compare inequality across all individuals worldwide yields the more recent concept of global inequality (Milanovic, 2016; Bourguignon, 2015).

Equity
Though equity and equality are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a difference in their meaning (Espinoza, 2007). Equality assumes equal starting points or disregards starting points, whereas equity is concerned with the difference in starting points (Melamed &

Samman, 2013). When applied to multilateral agreements such as the SDGs, this means that equity requires more effort of those nations with a better starting position: the concept of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (Weiss, 2002).

4.2 Classification of nations

The 193 member states of the UN are diverse in their cultural, socio-economic, and political characteristics. However, there are also many similarities to be found on a regional as well as a global scale. A testament to this is the great number of multilateral institutions, alliances, and unions. The diversity of these collaborations indicates how nations relate to each other on different aspects: a nation such as India, for example, is part of the UN, the G20, BRICS, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), to name a few. All these cooperations exist for different reasons and focus on aspects their members have in common (Yhome & Maini, 2017). These common aspects can also be used to place nations into groups and create a classification system, but no one classification incorporates all the differences and similarities that exist between nations. Despite this, a classification can provide important insights into dynamics among nations, especially when studying international negotiations. A common way to classify nations on a global scale is using the developed/developing classification (Nielsen, 2013). This development classification is widely used for analytical purposes in research on economic inequality, by institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, and the UN[1].

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[1] These organizations do not classify nations into developed/developed categories in the same manner. For an overview of how different organizations use this classification, and a proposal for an alternative methodology, see Nielsen (2011). More recent alternatives have also been proposed, e.g. by Hoffmeister (2020) and Saccone & Deaglio (2020)

Since the research of this thesis is focused on the UN framework, the UN classification is used. The UN classifies nations as developed or developing according to their Human Development Index (Nielsen, 2011) in the following manner (UN DESA, 2020). The developed nations comprise Europe and Northern America, plus Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. The developing nations include all countries in Africa, Asia (excluding Japan), and Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand. Another distinction that is often made within the developing nations is the 46 least developed nations[2].

While viewing political issues from the perspective of a developed/developing classification can certainly clarify differences in positions between different parts of the world as mentioned previously, a word of caution is warranted. This dichotomy can to a similar extent obscure the complexity of many other structures and relations (Eckl & Weber, 2007), which renders some inequalities invisible (Greig, Hulme & Turner, 2007). According to Antunes de Oliveira (2020) it also creates the idea that there is a directionality; that nations that are classified as 'developing' should be aiming to become 'developed' while there is no univocal form of development that should be universally desired. It is therefore important to use these binary classifications while keeping in mind the individual nations and complex interrelations within these categories (Kalfagianni, Fuchs & Hayden, 2019).

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[2] These are Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu, Yemen, and Zambia.

5. Empirical framework

In this section, I will explore the establishment of SDG 10 in more detail, which will serve as a point of reference when analyzing the positions of nations on inequality since the introduction of the goal.

As mentioned in the introduction, SDG 10 was widely debated in its establishment. Not only were the targets and indicators for the goal contested, the existence of a goal on inequality in itself was a point of discussion. Throughout the OWG process, SDG 10 was continually removed as a standalone goal and then re-added (Kamau, Chasek & O'Connor, 2018). Developed nations such as the United States, Canada, and Israel were adamant about preferring inequality as a cross-cutting theme:

> "We are less convinced by a standalone goal on inequality. This could lead us to a sterile debate that economists have been having for generations and that we are unlikely to resolve here. We see much greater practical potential and concrete impact in addressing inequality through goals and targets related to poverty eradication; equal access to productive and other assets; social protection floors; gender equality; elimination of discriminatory practices, policies, and laws; and job-rich and inclusive growth. " (the United States, Canada & Israel, 2014)

On the other hand, the G77 and China were some of the few that explicitly advocated a standalone goal:

> "In many countries, the share of income of the top 1% to 10% of the population has gone up very significantly, while the share of the bottom 40% has declined greatly and in some countries the incomes of the bottom segments of society have declined or stagnated. Reversal of the universal trend of growing income inequality should be also a global goal." (G77 and China, 2014)

Despite this statement, there was no consensus within the G77, and some more developed nations within the G77 were even vocal about not wanting a standalone goal (Luijten, 2019). However, its inclusion was established in the end, which can be attributed to the repeated interventions of developing nations within the G77 and China (Sengupta, 2014).

After the consensus on the inclusion of a standalone goal on inequality, much debate arose about what type of inequality to include. According to Fukuda-Parr (2019), the two distinguishable conceptions of inequality were that of vertical economic inequality, for which the main solution would lie in wealth distribution, and of horizontal inequality, which was linked to social inclusion as the most important solution. Another important distinction was that of between-country inequality and within-country inequality: while reducing within-country inequality would mostly be a problem for developing nations, reducing between-country inequality would require a coordinated effort by developing and developed nations alike (Luijten, 2019).

Most governments advocating social inclusion to address inequality were from developed nations, while the strongest advocators of using vertical economic inequality in the formulation of SDG 10 were developing nations (Fukuda-Parr, 2019; Luijten, 2019). This dichotomy was also visible as developed nations preferred to only address within-country inequality while developing nations were vocal about wanting targets addressing between-country inequality. As Sengupta (2014) described it: "The developing countries have insisted that inequalities between countries have been a major driver of inequalities globally and historically (…). This means that both developed and developing countries have to undertake commitments (…)"

Number	Target
10.1	By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population at a rate higher than the national average.
10.2	By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.
10.3	Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard.

10.4	Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.
10.5	Improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets and institutions and strengthen the implementation of such regulations.
10.6	Ensure enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions in order to deliver more effective, credible, accountable and legitimate institutions.
10.7	Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.
10.a	Implement the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with World Trade Organization agreements.
10.b	Encourage official development assistance and financial flows, including foreign direct investment, to States where the need is greatest, in particular least developed countries, African countries, small island developing States and landlocked developing countries, in accordance with their national plans and programmes.
10.c	By 2030, reduce to less than 3 percent the transaction costs of migrant remittances and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5 percent.

Table 1. Targets of SDG 10 (UNGA, 2015)

The main viewpoint reflected in the final targets (see Table 1) and indicators of SDG 10 was that which mostly developed nations advocated, though some of the points made by developing nations made it through. Developed nations' viewpoint predominated in that vertical inequality was kept out of the goal. Most of the targets reflect the concept of horizontal inequality, and the one target seemingly addressing vertical economic inequality, 10.1 (by 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population at a rate higher than the national average), does not truly reflect a decrease in inequality, as it is not concerned with the income and wealth distribution of the entire population (Fukuda-Parr, 2019): inequality overall could still increase, even when the income growth of the bottom 40 percent increases faster than the national average. Moreover, according to the World Inequality Report, income growth has been close to nothing for individuals between the global bottom 50% and top 1% (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez & Zucman, 2018) which would mean such a target as 10.1 is hardly relevant for fighting

inequality. On the difference between inequality within or between countries, the result was somewhere in the middle of what developed and developing nations each favored: the title of SDG 10 itself became "Reduce inequality within and among countries", though either the explicit mention of within-country inequality or between-country inequality is left out of the targets as well as the indicators.

Additionally, several factors weakened the overall potential impact of SDG 10. Firstly, none of the commonly accepted methods for measuring inequality of outcome, such as the Gini coefficient or the Palma ratio, were used in the formulation of the indicators of SDG 10 (Donald, 2016). Secondly, no one national or international body is directly responsible for the goal or dedicated to ensuring progress on it. This lack of institutional oversight makes SDG 10 vulnerable to '… strategic neglect' (CESR, 2016, p.9).

In conclusion, despite efforts mostly from developing nations, the final SDGs did not contain an ambitious goal on inequality, one that addresses the gap between extreme wealth and extreme poverty. Due to the aforementioned weaknesses and ambiguity of SDG 10, the positions of nations on inequality could still be driving discourses and consequently even determine the progress on the goal.

6. Methodological framework

I perform qualitative research in this thesis and follow a triangulation approach: the research consists of three parts, containing primary as well as secondary research and using different methods. This triangulation, as an overarching method, will increase the validity and credibility of the research (Salkind, 2010). By combining different methodologies, the findings from the different parts of the research can be combined and compared, thus leading

to a more robust conclusion (Noble & Heale, 2019). The first part consists of secondary research in the shape of a literature review. The second part consists of primary research in the shape of an expert interview, using a semi-structured method. The third and final part is primary research in the shape of a discourse analysis, using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology. The three parts of the research strategy inform each other: the results from each part serve as input for the next.

The literature review is first done to gather information on the research topic in general, as well as to identify the nations that held strong positions on inequality prior to the establishment of the 2030 Agenda. After this, the information of the literature review is used to conduct an expert interview to gain more in-depth information on the topic of international negotiations and meetings, in particular on the processes that influence discourses of such meetings. Lastly, the combined results from the literature review and expert interview are used for a critical discourse analysis to assess and interpret the positions of nations on inequality since the introduction of SDG 10 in the context of the global inequality dynamics.

5.1 Literature review

As the first component of the research, I perform a literature review on the subject of economic inequality and specifically SDG 10, the goal on inequality within the Sustainable Development Goals. This is done for two reasons. First, to find existing research and gather perspectives and conclusions on (the negotiations of) SDG 10. And second, to establish the context of the discourse on inequality by finding literature on the current world economy and inequality dynamics.

A rigorous literature review method on the basis of grounded theory (Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller & Wilderom, 2011) is used. I chose this method due to my limited prior knowledge of the literature. As grounded theory assumes a 'clean slate' when starting research, this was an appropriate method for this literature review. The method consists of a five-stage approach, which was established by Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller & Wilderom (ibid.) and contains the following stages:

1. In the 'Define' stage, the criteria for appropriate or useful literature are defined;

2. In the 'Search' stage the search for articles is performed using the search engine Google Scholar;

3. In the 'Select' stage the articles are partly read and the relevance is determined, plus further relevant articles are found using a forward and backward citation review;

4. In the 'Analyze' stage, the final selection of articles is thoroughly read, and important findings and insights are highlighted as a form of open coding;

5. In the final 'Present' stage the important concepts and insights are combined and structured.

Prior to the literature review, I defined the criteria for literature relevant to the research (Stage 1) using several keywords or -phrases or a combination of these, namely: 'Sustainable Development Goals', 'SDGs', 'SDG 10', 'inequality' '2030 Agenda' 'negotiations' 'OWG' 'High-level Political Forum' and 'HLPF'. A range for the year of publication was not set, because it was possible relevant literature on inequality would date back before the establishment or even negotiations of the 2030 Agenda. From this search, I found a total of 233 papers that were potentially relevant based on the title and short description in Google Scholar (Stage 2). In the 'Select' stage (3), I read the abstracts of these papers and did a forward and backward citation review of the papers that were deemed relevant. This amounted to a final selection of 68 papers in total. I read these papers thoroughly and

highlighted interesting findings (Stage 4), and finally incorporated these into the results (Stage 5).

5.2 Expert interview

In order to critically analyze a discourse, it is essential to understand the context of the discourse that is analyzed. As Fairclough (2001) writes, social research should include analysis of the complex processes which go on in texts and interactions. In the case of the reports of the HLPF meetings, the language used is diplomatic and often interprets very differently when the context is known. According to Onglesby (2016, p. 243), "Framing and reframing arguments to find the convergent wavelengths, diplomats traditionally engage in a particular diplomatic discourse (…)". Interpreting the text 'as is' will therefore not always yield the results that reflect reality most accurately. International negotiations or meetings can be difficult to understand without the global political context in which the discussion took place. For this reason, I conduct an expert interview as the second component of my research. Expert interviews in the exploratory phase of a project are considered an efficient and concentrated method for data gathering (Meuser & Nagel, 2009; Bogner & Menz, 2009).

I conduct the expert interview with Pamela Chasek, the executive editor and founder of the Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB). The ENB is an independent reporting service part of the think tank International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). Chasek has reported for and edited the ENB for almost 30 years. The reporting of the ENB focuses on negotiations, conferences, and workshops linked to sustainability and environmental policy within the United Nations. The ENB also brings out detailed daily reports while the HLPF is taking place each year. As a result of her experience in the field of reporting on the HLPF and the SDG negotiations in general, Chasek has published the book *Transforming multilateral*

diplomacy: The inside story of the Sustainable Development Goals together with colleagues (Kamau, Chasek & O'Connor, 2018).

The interview is meant to be informative and aid the researcher in understanding the negotiation processes that are analyzed. However, it is not expected to give an exhaustive understanding that only years of reporting experience in the field of international negotiations can provide. The expert interview is semi-structured and uses an interview guide. The interview is semi-structured as opposed to open or structured in that an interview guide is created in advance to steer the interview, but freedom is given to the expert to address topics that are not on the list of topics in the interview guide (Kempf-Leonard, 2004). This is done as the nature of the interview (expert interview) makes it plausible that the interviewee sees relevance and connections with certain topics that were not yet known to the researcher (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). The guide (see Table 2) is made in advance to ensure that topics of interest are addressed and to prepare questions and potential follow-up questions. The interview was held on November 10, 2020 from 17:00 – 18:00 CET.

Part of interview	Questions, comments, general points	Estimated time
Introduction	Introduce self Explain research Discuss background information of expert	10 minutes
Body	Topic I: ENB What is the position of ENB reporters in negotiations? What is the relation of ENB to national governments? Topic II: HLPF How does the 'format' of the HLPF relate to the OWG? How are the discussions held: who gets to say what at what time? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the HLPF? Topic III: SDG 10	40 minutes

	What are some of the main discussion points about inequality within the HLPF? What is your view on the process by which SDG 10 was established?	
	Topic IV: Diplomatic language What phrases or words are often indicative of some hidden meaning? What are some commonly used 'tactical' statements?	
	Any additional topics that come up	
Conclusion	Closing remarks	10 minutes

Table 2. Interview guide.

Data source

As Chasek (2001a) describes in detail in her book *Earth negotiations: Analyzing thirty years of environmental diplomacy*, there are many nuances to the complex processes of multilateral negotiations which remain quite inaccessible to 'outsiders'. The reporters of the ENB however have gathered this information over their years of reporting experience. They have familiarized themselves with interpreting diplomatic language and might recognize patterns in the discussions. For example, the reporters are familiar with the issues that have been the focus of negotiations for a long time and have actors in a deadlock, and with the issues that are newly negotiated and may potentially result in an agreement. The reporters also have insight into the (sometimes subtle) distinction between which issues reflect the actual positions of actors and which are bargaining chips used to gain an advantage in another issue, often even outside of the negotiations at hand.

The ENB was established as somewhat of a coincidence during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) negotiations. The founders of the ENB were reporting on one of the meetings of UNCED as a one-time assignment. However, after this meeting, there was a huge demand from governments and NGOs alike for more

reports of other meetings and the founders decided to pursue this opportunity (Goree, 2012). The ENB is independent, meaning that it does not get funding from the IISD and thus has to acquire its own funding. This funding mostly comes from nations and is often provided as a form of development cooperation as the reporting helps developing nations with high delegation turnover, to improve the accessibility of knowledge on negotiations (Chasek, 2001b). Environment ministries are also a source of funding. Nations can give earmarked funding to indicate the priority events or areas on which they want reporting. However, there is no editorial control from nations; they cannot decide what is covered and how it is covered (Chasek, 2020). All donors are indicated on the front page of the *Bulletin*[3]. The coverage of meetings has to be as factual as possible, there isn't much room in the reporting for interpretation[4]. The goal of the reporters is to talk to as many people as possible: the team of ENB is set up to be diverse in language abilities and regional backgrounds to reach a wide range of delegates and reflect different perspectives of the participants (Chasek & Wagner, 2012).

5.3 Critical discourse analysis

Discourses can be defined in many ways; in this research, I define a discourse as a collection of (recurring) ideas, concepts and categories that are present in a discussion, that shape the meaning and interpretation of phenomena (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Discourse analysis is a method of analyzing written or spoken text not just in what is written or spoken, but what motivations lie behind this text as well. Discourse analysis therefore allows for an interpretation of discourses based on text as well as context (Van Dijk, 1985). Critical

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[3] See, for example, IISD (2020).
[4] This is why a separate part of the *Bulletin* is dedicated to the analysis of the reporters, in which they reflect on the meeting and interpret the meeting together with the information they gathered 'in the corridors'.

Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a broad movement or methodology that places the discourse analysis in a social context (Fairclough, 2013); it uses the analysis of discourses to assess power relations between language users and to see whether the discourse reflects the social context. As Ruth Wodak writes, "In the tradition of critical theory, CDA investigates the discursive aspects of societal disparities and inequalities. CDA frequently detects the linguistic means used by the privileged to stabilize or even to intensify inequities in society." For this reason, as the third component of my research, I analyze the discourse using CDA to assess the positions of language users in relation to their position in the global inequality dynamics. In this research, the discourse studied is the collective body of statements that are made during the HLPF meetings, specifically on the theme of inequality. The language users are the actors that make these statements during the HLPF meetings, in particular the nations that make statements.

Coding

Coding is an analytical strategy that complements the discourse analysis done in this research by creating oversight within a vast collection of source materials. Coding the text will allow finding similar statements and actors. This will enable the identification of patterns across the texts that are analyzed, both in what is said and who is saying what. Altogether this will make it possible to identify the (variations in) positions of different actors over time.

Code	Keywords	Context examples	Position on SDG 10	Position on inequality
reducing inequality, general/unspecified	inequality, equality, equity, equitable, inequitable	"inequality is on the rise"	In line with SDG 10 / unsure	Weak
reducing economic	inclusive economic	"technology can drive economic growth but also	In line with SDG 10	Weak

inequality, general/unspecified	growth, SDG 10, economic inequality	exacerbate economic inequalities"		
reducing horizontal economic inequality	inclusion, discrimination, marginalized groups	"SDG 10 requires the elimination of discriminative laws and policies that criminalize marginalized groups"	In line with SDG 10	Weak
reducing vertical economic inequality, within SDG 10	income inequality, target 10.1, bottom 40%	"Plans are underway to increase the income of 40% of the poorest by 2025"	In line with SDG 10	Weak
reducing vertical economic inequality, beyond SDG 10	equality of outcome, Palma, income inequality, Gini, wealth inequality	"She identified high unemployment and high wealth inequality as challenges for Latin America"	Beyond the scope of SDG 10	Strong
income or wealth redistribution	progressive taxation, redistribution of wealth, equal distribution	"fair taxation regimes can ensure equal distribution of benefits" "increase ODA using 1% of the wealth of the world's 2208 billionaires"	Beyond the scope of SDG 10	Strong

Table 3. Coding dictionary.

As the data used for this research came from different sources and sometimes consists of extensive texts, there was a necessity to bring these different sources together and analyze them in a consistent manner. Therefore, NVivo was used. NVivo is a computer software used for qualitative data analysis. It can be used to import different source materials and apply coding, which helps to elucidate patterns across multiple data sources. All source materials were therefore imported into NVivo. Before coding in NVivo, a coding dictionary was produced (see Table 3). This coding dictionary was used to analyze the data thoroughly and consistently and to inform the reader of the classification that was used during the coding.

The coding was done by reading the source documents carefully. Aside from reading the documents, a follow-up search is done in all documents on several words and proxies for words: 'SDG 10', 'equ' (since it covers 'equality', 'equal', 'inequality' 'unequal' but also

'equity'), the term 'inclus' (since it covers 'inclusion', 'inclusive' and 'inclusivity') the term 'distribut' (since it covers 'redistribution' and 'distributive'), the term 'tax' and the term 'discriminat' (since it covers 'dicrimination' as well as 'discriminatory'). Searching for these terms served as a control mechanism to make sure that no relevant statements were looked over in reading the documents first.

Different codes are made to cover the various distinctions that can be made in economic inequality: mentions of general or unspecified economic inequality, horizontal economic inequality, and vertical inequality as reflected in Target 10.1. A code is also made for mentions of vertical inequality beyond Target 10.1 and income or wealth (re)distribution, as addressing these issues was left out of SDG 10. Finally, a code for mentions of general or unspecified inequality is made for when a statement about inequality could mean economic inequality but does not explicitly say so. This category might seem superfluous as economic inequality is the main use of the term 'inequality'. However, 'inequality' could also refer to the broader concept of unevenness as described in the conceptual framework. Another option is that there was context to indicate another meaning of inequality, but this was not included in the reporting. Since no source material was available to definitively say that economic inequality was meant, the separate category was created. The category excludes any mentions of inequality that are clearly not meant to be interpreted as economic inequality, such as gender inequality and inequality in education.

Another distinction that is made while coding is the type of actor that made a statement. All statements pertaining to inequality were coded, however, since this research aims to focus on nation states specifically, the statements of nations are given a separate coding 'Nations'. No other actor categories were used. Whether or not a statement was coded as coming from a

nation is determined as follows. Statements from nation representatives are coded as nation statements. Statements from national government representatives, which are not necessarily the nation's representative, are also coded as nation statements. This can pertain to actors from both national and local government. The statement must be made from the actor's position as a government official. Another type of actor that is classified as 'Nations' is an actor that represents an alliance of nations, such as the European Union. Two excluding factors are also applied to coding nation statements: first, the actors cannot also be affiliated with other institutions (such as a national representative that also chairs a commission in the United Nations). Second, the actors cannot come from civil society.

Operationalization

The resulting codes are used to create a general overview of the positions on inequality to provide context for the discourse analysis. The type of code was used to identify a position as 'Strong' (see Table 3). Another way to identify a 'strong' position was if one nation made a (weak) statement on inequality ≥ 3 times during the 5 meetings of the HLPF. Then, the statements of nations are analyzed in the context of their statements during the OWG sessions of the 2030 Agenda as well as the nations' current position in the global inequality dynamics.

Data source

The HLPF is the body of the United Nations that is responsible for the UN's policy on sustainable development, especially the SDGs. The establishment of the HLPF as part of a "(...) strengthened institutional framework for sustainable development" (UNGA, 2012, p. 14) was one of the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (from here on referred to as Rio+20). It was decided that meetings of the forum would be convened under the auspices of the UNGA and of the UN ECOSOC (UNGA, 2013). The

meetings of the UN ECOSOC are held yearly, while the meetings of the UNGA are held every four years. Three HLPF meetings were held under the auspices of the UN ECOSOC before the 2030 Agenda was adopted. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, five HLPF meetings under the auspices of the UN ECOSOC were held to discuss progress in implementing the SDGs. One HLPF meeting was held under the auspices of the UNGA, in 2019: the SDG Summit. Each HLPF meeting has a different theme[5] and a set of goals that are reviewed in depth[6] which are determined in advance and adopted in a resolution by the UNGA. The overarching segments of each meeting are the same: a five-day integration segment, a three-day ministerial segment, and a one-day high-level segment. Overall, the content of the segments consists of the "systematic follow-up and review of the implementation of the Agenda" (UNGA, 2016, p. 1). During the ministerial segment, the progress of individual nations is reviewed through Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). During the high-level segment, a ministerial declaration is adopted reflecting the conclusions of that year's HLPF meeting (UNGA, 2013).

The UN ECOSOC and UNGA each document the meetings of the HLPF that are convened under their auspices, and this documentation is accessible through the UN website (UN ECOSOC, 2020; UNGA, 2019). This documentation consists of a summary of all the events that are part of the meeting. This concise reporting is useful for getting an overview of what was discussed during meetings; however, it does not lend itself for a discourse analysis where

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[5] The themes for the past 5 meetings were as follows: Ensuring that no one is left behind (2016); Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world (2017); Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies (2018); Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality (2019); Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development (2020) (UNGA, 2016)

[6] The goals for the meetings 2017-2019 were as follows (there were no focus goals in 2016 and 2020): Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 14 (2017); Goals 6, 7, 11, 12 and 15 (2018); Goals 4, 8, 10, 13 and 16 (2019) (UNGA, 2016)

it is required to know who the language users are and what they said. Therefore, a secondary source was used: the Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB). The ENB brings out detailed reports of the HLPF meetings convened under the auspices of the UN ECOSOC; all statements of participants are written down, albeit summarized in a maximum of 75 words per statement (Chasek, 2020). The ENB reports on each day of the HLPF meeting as well as creating a summary report for the entire meeting. The reports are publicly available through the ENB website[7]. The collective body of these daily reports and summary reports, a total of 33 documents, are used as a data source. No detailed reports from either the UNGA or the ENB were available for the meeting of the HLPF held under the auspices of the UNGA in 2019, which is why this meeting was not included in the analysis.

6. Results

The results from the three components of the research are combined to form an integrated answer to the research question and its sub-questions. Here, these results will be discussed, structured according to the three sub-questions.

Section 6.1, "General trends", answers the question: What are the general trends in the discourse on inequality since the introduction of SDG 10: reducing inequality?

Section 6.2, "Changes in positions of nations", answers the question: (How) has the position of nations strongly opposing or supporting a goal on inequality changed since the introduction of SDG 10: reducing inequality?

Finally, section 6.3, "Changes and strong positions in context", answers the question: How do nations with strong positions on inequality relate to each other, and (how) has this changed?

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[7] https://enb.iisd.org

6.1 General trends

Since the introduction of SDG 10, inequality has been mentioned a total of 165 times in statements of participants of the HLPF. In 2019, a record number of 73 statements were made on the topic of inequality, which is at least in part explained by SDG 10 being one of the goals discussed that year. Despite this fact, not all discussions about inequality occurred during the discussion of SDG 10; there seemed to be much more attention on the topic of inequality in general and throughout the meeting. However, the HLPF of 2020 shows a dramatic decrease in this attention. The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in March of 2020 has undoubtedly influenced the HLPF of 2020. 2020 was supposed to be the year in which a new work plan would be set up after the first four-year cycle of the HLPF, a plan that had to be postponed. Instead, most of the meeting revolved around battling the pandemic and the interlinkages between the pandemic and the SDGs (IISD, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the world of environmental negotiations in general. Many meetings are postponed or canceled, with the exception of meetings that were held to adopt the budgets of several resolutions of which the funding expired in 2020. According to Chasek (2020), "(…) these meetings would normally include negotiations, which were now omitted. Instead, a silence procedure was used in which budgets were adopted unless there were objections. In this respect, the 2020 HLPF seems to have been barely affected: due to the nature of the HLPF, which consists mostly of presentation and little negotiation, the 2020 edition could proceed fairly unchanged." The agenda of the meeting was however radically adjusted to reflect the position of the SDGs in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this altered the discussions significantly toward how to manage as well as how to recover from the pandemic (ENB, 2020). This shifted the focus

away from many topics and SDGs, including SDG 10 and inequality, despite the many interlinkages between inequality and those who were hit hardest by the pandemic (Berkhout et al., 2021).
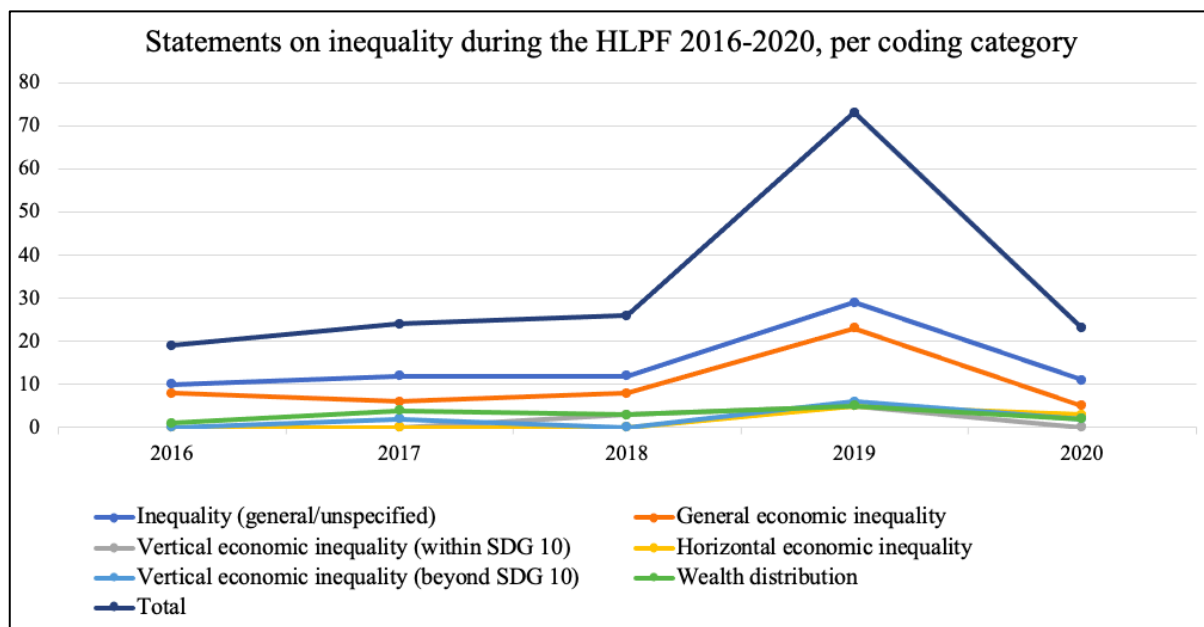

Figure 1. Statements on inequality made during the HLPF meetings from 2016 to 2020, per coding category as defined in the coding dictionary.

Overall, the HLPF meetings show a slight increase in the number of statements made on inequality between 2016 and 2018 (Figure 1). In 2019 there is a peak, while in 2020 the number of statements returns to levels prior to 2019. The statements made are mostly 'Weak', being in line with current targets and ambitions of SDG 10. Few statements are made reflecting a 'Strong' position, being in favor of more ambitious measures for inequality reduction (Figure 2).
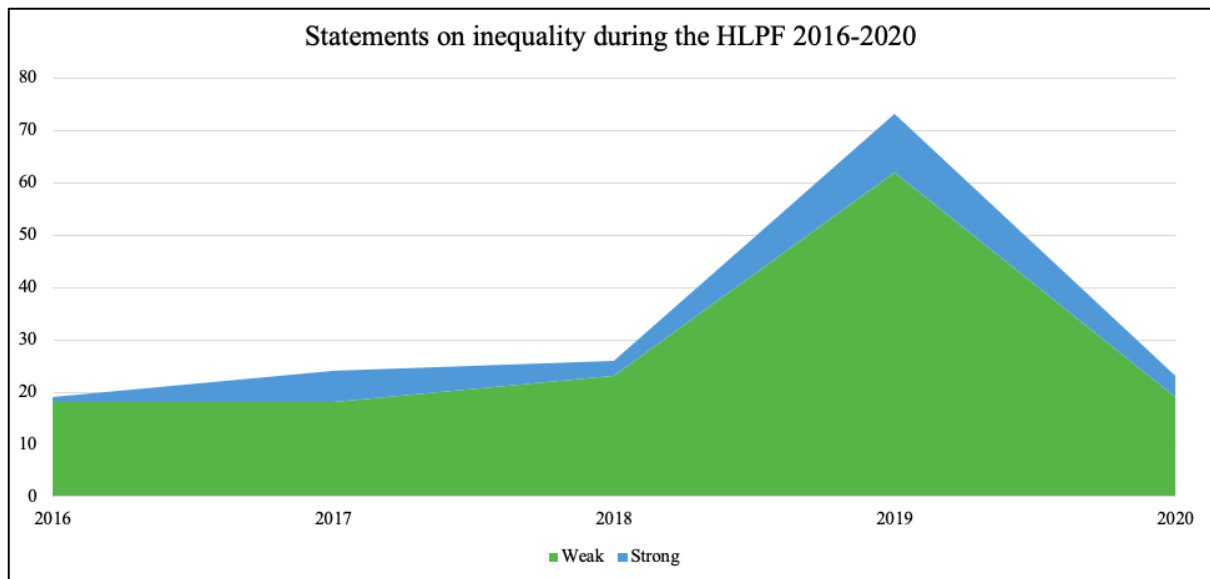
Figure 2. Statements on inequality made during the HLPF meetings from 2016 to 2020, classified as either 'Weak' or 'Strong' as defined in the coding dictionary.

6.2 Changes in positions of nations

To know if any changes in the positions of nations have occurred, it is important to know what positions nations held in the negotiations of the OWG. I will discuss the nations that strongly opposed or supported a goal on inequality during the negotiations of the 2030 Agenda as well as the nations that took a strong position on inequality since the establishment of SDG 10.

Negotiating the 2030 Agenda

As opposed to the HLPF meetings since adopting the 2030 Agenda, the statements during the negotiations of the 2030 Agenda were rarely made by individual nations. Most statements came from groups of nations, called troikas, as a result of the way the SDG negotiation process was mandated. The outcome document of the Rio+20 meeting, named "The Future We Want", mandated 'a set of sustainable development goals' as well as a process by which these goals should be established: "An open working group shall be constituted (…) and shall comprise thirty representatives, nominated by Member States from the five United Nations

regional groups, with the aim of achieving fair, equitable and balanced geographical representation." (UNGA, 2012, p. 47). There were seventy nations interested in participating in this open working group (OWG), while the resolution only mandated thirty representatives. As a solution, the nations that wanted to participate formed groups of 2 or 3, which became known as troikas (Kamau, Chasek & O'Connor, 2018). Most statements made in the OWG were made by troikas, though sometimes individual nations spoke out as well as other groupings of nations (LDCs, SIDS, G77, etc.). Several nations stood out in the positions they took on SDG 10 during the thirteen sessions of the OWG.

Research from Luijten (2019) and Fukuda-Parr (2019) shows which nations advocated for an ambitious goal that addressed vertical economic inequality. The nations that did so more than three times throughout the sessions of the OWG, were Bolivia; Tunisia; the troika of Brazil and Nicaragua; and the G77 as a group. Pakistan, Belarus, and Guyana didn't meet the criterium of more than three statements, but these nations did make strong statements in favor of an ambitious goal on inequality which were particularly influential during the discussion. On the other hand, Luijten (2019) and Fukuda-Parr (2019) also found nations that consistently tried to break up the goal into a crosscutting theme or watered down the targets by framing inequality as purely an issue of social inclusion (horizontal inequality). The nations that did so over three times in the OWG were: the troika of Australia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom; the troika of Cyprus, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates; the troika of Bulgaria and Croatia; the troika of Denmark, Ireland, and Norway; the troika of Israel, Canada, and the United States; and France.

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda

The statements made on inequality during the discussions, especially the statements made by nations, were rarely very ambitious or controversial. On the contrary, most statements on inequality seem to reflect the widely accepted notion that inequality is an important issue to address. This makes determining the position of nations difficult as such statements do not directly reflect a strong position. This is different from the statements made during the sessions of the OWG, which did reflect strong positions. Since adopting the 2030 Agenda, the HLPF does not require adopting a strong position on a topic, because the SDGs have already been 'set'. Especially in 2016, the first year since the adoption of the SDGs, there weren't any strong statements on inequality from nations. This can be linked to the fact that the review process of the SDGs hadn't started yet, meaning there was little to say on the progress of the goal. Inequality was mentioned only in broad terms ('inequality needs to be addressed').

Since then, as the progress on the goals began being measured, the statements became somewhat stronger, addressing measures against inequality outside of the scope of SDG 10 ('ensuring even income distribution', 'take corrective measures to redistribute wealth'). However, these stronger statements were the exception, as most nations still aligned with SDG 10 in their statements. In contrast with the OWG, strong statements about inequality since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda only appeared in favor of ambitious measures for inequality, and not one nation made a statement reflecting a position of being against SDG 10. This is not surprising, as there is no reason to speak out against SDG 10 or fighting inequality; not talking about inequality seems to be the best way to keep the topic off the agenda and steer the discussion to other topics Thus, rather than only looking at those nations and actors which actively participated in the discourse around inequality, it is more indicative to also look at the nations that refrained from any statements on inequality at all: 'language

refrainers' instead of language users. The distribution of inequality statements across nations is displayed in Figure 3.
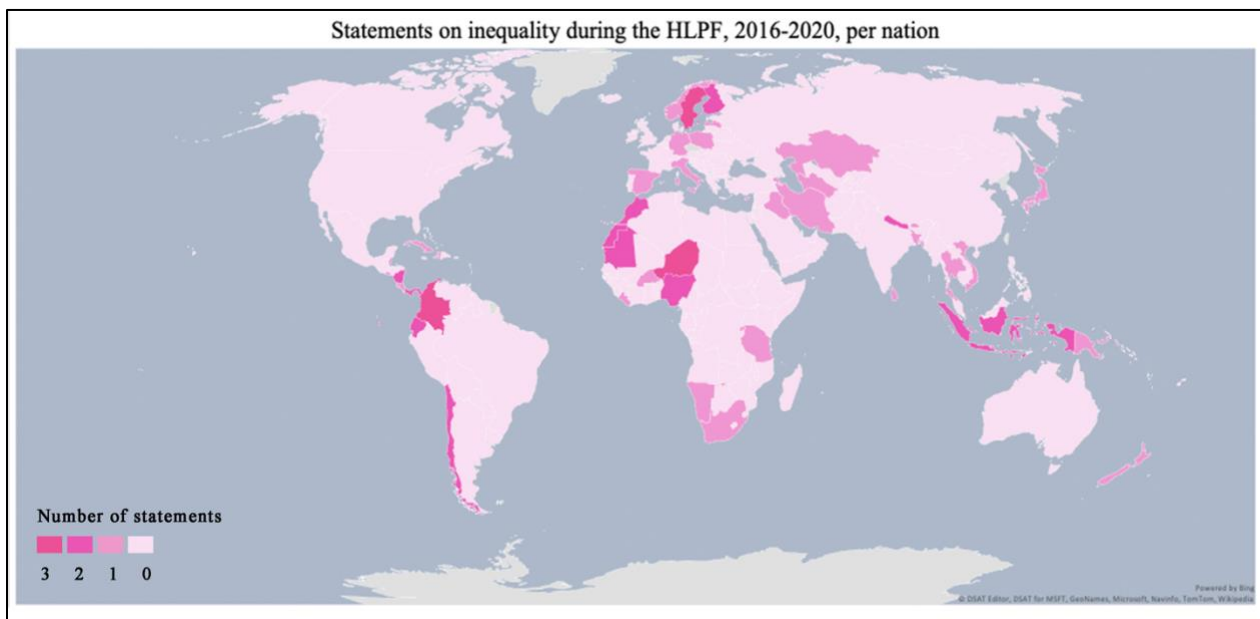

Figure 3. World map displaying the number of statements made on inequality per nation during the HLPF from 2016 to 2020.

The nations that made weak but repeated statements on inequality since the introduction of the SDGs were Niger, Mexico, Colombia, and Sweden. Nations that made strong statements on inequality were Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, and Norway. Some of these nations were also taking strong positions in the OWG. Nicaragua alone is consistent in advocating for strong measures against inequality in the OWG as well as since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, but Nigeria, Colombia, Ecuador, Bangladesh, and Burkina Faso also made statements in the OWG as members of the G77. Surprisingly, Norway took a strong position *against* a standalone goal on inequality during the OWG. Sweden did not take a strong position during the sessions of the OWG but has done so since the introduction of SDG 10. Sweden and Norway are the only developed nations that were vocal against inequality, which is in line with their so-called 'Nordic Model' in which social equality plays a pivotal role (Andersen et al., 2007). However, it could be expected that other nations within this Nordic Model (Denmark, Finland) would have similar strong positions if this was the

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determining factor for their position. Overall, these results indicate that developed nations are still the majority of those advocating for more progress in the fight against inequality.

Of the nations that explicitly opposed a goal on inequality or made statements against ambitious targets, only two were vocal about inequality after the introduction of SDG 10: Cyprus and Norway. The nations that were vocal against a goal on inequality but were silent on inequality during the HLPF since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda are Australia, the United Kingdom, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, The Netherlands, Israel, Canada, the United States, and France. This group is characterized by all nations either being developed (and thus profiting from between-country inequality) or being developing and having high within-country inequality (Luijten, 2019). This would give them a reason to employ an ignore strategy on the issue, as there are benefits for them to not combat existing inequality. Norway, as mentioned before, seems to have radically changed its position from strongly against a goal on inequality to strongly in favor of more ambitious measures against inequality. Cyprus, being strongly against inequality in the OWG, made one statement aligning with SDG 10 since the adoption of the goal. These shifts could be due to both nations' position in the OWG being linked to their troika, and not reflecting their individual position. It could also be a sign of a shift in the way they perceive the urgency of fighting inequality since SDG 10 was introduced.

In light of these findings, it seems that the 'ignore-and-reframe strategy' the developed nations employed in the OWG (Fukuda-Parr, 2019) may have been replaced by an 'ignore strategy' now that the 2030 Agenda is adopted: while the nations that consistently mentioned SDG 10 and inequality were trying to keep the topic on the agenda, the nations that chose not to mention SDG 10 and inequality would prefer the issue to be ignored. This might be a strong

assertion to make in itself (couldn't it just be that the nations that didn't engage in the inequality discourse were prioritizing other topics?). However, this assumption becomes more robust when the language users and 'language refrainers' in this discourse are placed in the context of the global inequality dynamics in the following chapter.

6.3 Changes and strong positions in context

The fact that nations differed in their position on inequality in the OWG of the SDGs cannot be seen separately from what nations 'gain' or 'lose' from adding a strong goal on inequality. Inequality, by definition, disproportionally affects those at the bottom end of the spectrum, while those at the top end are gaining from this imbalance (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2007). An ambitious goal on inequality would have the potential to disturb the imbalance in favor of those at the bottom end. As Ravallion (2020) illustrates, the 'vast bulk of poverty', or the bottom end of the inequality equation, can be found in the developing world. Those that are at the figurative top end of the equation, in this case the developed nations, prefer to keep the status quo and act in a way that reinforces their advantage (Melamed & Samman, 2013). As Freistein and Mahler (2016, p. 2142) put it:

> "Those situated in influential positions will rarely be willing to take (measures against inequality), whether because of tangible economic interests or of a diffuse fear of social downward mobility or of change more generally. In contrast, those who would benefit from a reduction in inequality are often not in a position to take the adequate measures."

This is why in the OWG, developed nations were reluctant to accept an agenda that would require more from them than "… limited finance and -often patriarchic- assistance" (Caballero, 2019, p. 138). Illustrative of this division is the important role of the difference between addressing between-country inequality and within-country inequality during the OWG sessions, as described by Chasek (2020). Inequality between nations had long been a topic of discussion in intergovernmental politics. However, addressing within-country

inequality was a relatively new issue and had only been addressed in the context of community inequalities, such as with discriminatory practices. This was first rejected by developing nations as they feared such a goal on within-country inequality would be used as leverage for, for example, development loans, leading to a situation where development cooperation would be stopped as long as a developing nation did not make progress on reducing inequality within their country. According to Chasek (2020), "(…) a turning point for this issue was the recognition that wealthy nations also experience this within-country inequality". The Occupy Wall Street movement, which protested the extreme wealth inequality in the US, was at its peak at the beginning of the SDG negotiations. The negotiations also took place at the UN headquarters in New York, right where Occupy Wall Street was happening. This proved to delegates from developing nations that within-country inequality was not just an issue of developing countries. Some government representatives were really surprised when they were looking into inequalities in developed nations. This strengthened the belief that within-country inequality was a universal issue, and that any conditionality from developed nations to developing nations could be reversed.

Indeed, national governments, from developed as well as developing countries, are entangled in inequalities. While governments are to a large extent responsible for inequalities, both within and between countries, they also have the tools to reduce them (Frieden, 2001; Ha, 2012; Battisti & Zeira, 2018). According to a 2020 Oxfam briefing paper on global inequality, this is complicated by the relationship between national governments and billionaires:

> "It has been estimated that two-thirds of billionaire wealth exists because of inheritance or is tainted by crony connections to government. Such power can significantly increase economic inequality by channeling profits into the hands of the few. For example, when billionaires are able to use their connections with government to secure exclusive rights to provide services, there is big money to be made at the expense of customers including poor people." (Coffey et al., 2020, p. 22)

Relations between those in power and wealthy individuals can influence the incentives of governments to take a certain approach or stance on inequality (Sayer, 2016), which cannot be seen separately from international policymaking on inequality.

However, inequality is not a fixed state. On the contrary, inequality dynamics appear to be highly unstable (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez & Zucman, 2017). On a global scale, inequality within countries has been rising the past decades while inequality between countries seems to have been decreasing (Bourguignon, 2015; Milanovic, 2016). Nevertheless, as illustrated in the 2018 World Inequality Report, an important reason for the decrease of inequality between countries becomes evident when this data is disaggregated. Income growth in Asia, especially China, has been mainly responsible for the reduction in between-country inequality: from 1980 to 2016, China's income growth rate was 831%, with their share of the global income rising from 3% in 1980 to 19% in 2018 (Alvaredo et al., 2018). This contribution to the decrease in between-country inequality conceals the stagnation that occurred in many other regions, with some regions even being worse off than before: the incomes in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America grew less than the world average, leading to an even higher inequality relative to the rest of the world (ibid.). Overall, between-country inequality can still be said to be high (UN DESA, 2020) and global inequality only seems to be rising (Ravallion, 2021). Nevertheless, the rise in within-country inequality shows that overall global inequality has become about class as well as about nationality (Chancel, 2019), thus making inequality an issue that defies country borders.
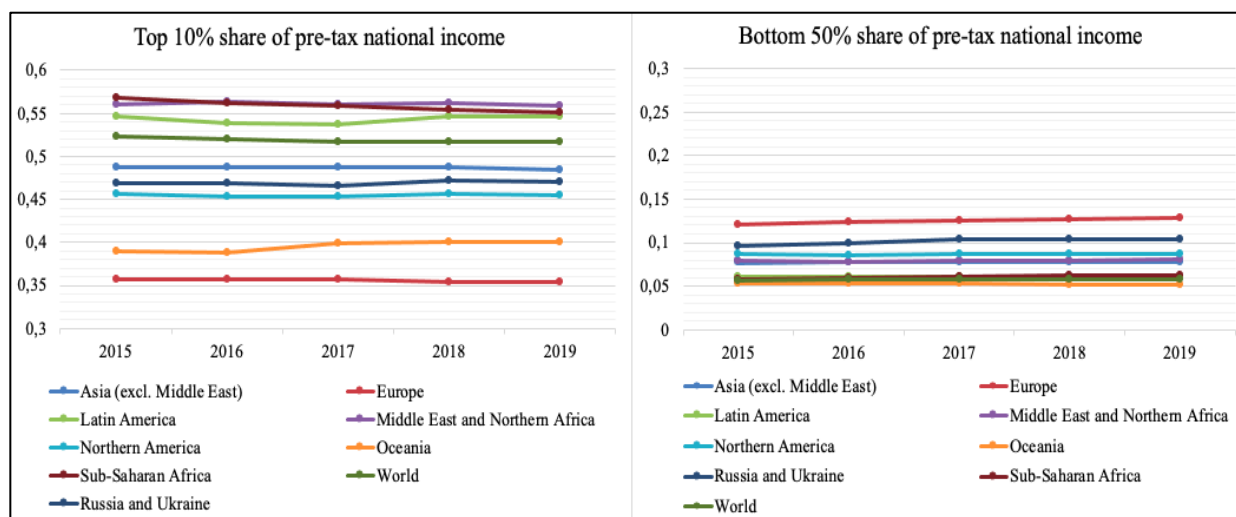
Table 4. Top 10% and bottom 40% shares of pre-tax national income per world region, based on the most recent data from WID (2021).

Despite inequality being an issue that is felt in all parts of the world, not enough has changed since the introduction of the SDGs to make nations more equal. This confirms the enduring nature of inequalities once they are in existence (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016). The most recent data from the World Inequality Database shows that between 2015-2019, in none of the world regions either the top 10% or the bottom 40% of pre-tax national income has changed by more than 0,1% (See Table 4). This means the high global inequality levels measured before the introduction of the SDGs persist. While it may be too soon to show any significant reduction in inequality (both within and between countries) as a result of the SDGs, it does show that SDG 10 has not yet had the steering effect on inequality reduction many had hoped for (Saiz & Donald, 2017; Freistein & Mahlert, 2016). The latest report of the Secretary-General on the Sustainable Development Goals also reflects a bleak outlook on the progress made in reducing inequality:

> "Notwithstanding positive signs of reducing inequality in some dimensions, such as a reduction of relative income inequality in some countries and preferential trade status benefiting lower-income countries, inequality still persists in all forms. The COVID-19 crisis is hitting the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries the hardest and threatens to have a particularly damaging impact on the poorest countries. It is exposing the

profound inequalities that exist within and among countries and is exacerbating those inequalities." (UN ECOSOC, 2020)

The persisting differences between the positions of developed and developing nations in the discourse on inequality echo this stagnation in progress on inequality reduction. Some nations have altered their position on inequality, but the division between developed and developing nations remains painfully visible in the discourse as well as in the global inequality dynamics.

7. Conclusion

Using the information acquired by a literature review and an expert interview, a critical discourse analysis of reports from the HLPF meetings of the past five years sheds light on the positions that nations take on inequality during these meetings. The findings are compared with the positions of nations during the negotiations of the SDGs, as well as with the context of global inequality dynamics, to answer the research question: "How have UN member states' positions on inequality, especially compared between the nations that strongly opposed or supported a goal on inequality, changed since the introduction of SDG 10: reducing inequality?". The research shows that nations seemingly still act in accordance with their current position in the world inequality dynamics, in line with earlier research by Luijten (2019) and Fukuda-Parr (2019). Developing nations (Niger, Mexico, Colombia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bangladesh, and Burkina Faso) take a strong position, in that they consistently speak out against inequality and are in favor of ambitious measures against inequality that go beyond the targets of SDG 10. Different from the OWG, however, two developed nations with progressive economic policies (Norway and Sweden) also took strong positions. This is surprising, as Norway even spoke out against a goal on inequality in the OWG. The other developed nations that were vocal during the SDG negotiations about preferring to keep

ambitious measures against inequality off the 2030 Agenda, using an 'ignore-and-reframe strategy', seem to have resorted to an 'ignore strategy'. None of the developed nations that spoke out against a goal on inequality in the OWG has made a statement on inequality in the past five years since the establishment of the 2030 Agenda, except for two nations: Norway and Cyprus. Overall, the persistent positions of nations on inequality reflect the stagnation in inequality reduction around the world, which SDG 10 has seemingly not been able to change.

8. Discussion

Limitations

Since no studies on SDG 10 and inequality in the discourse of the HLPF were done prior to my research, there were seemingly a thousand ways to start exploring this topic. Due to time constraints, only a small selection of strategies could be used. The subsequent delineation of the research was necessary but has left many gaps in the knowledge as well as a low external validity. The critical discourse analysis done in this research gives a preliminary insight into how nations have positioned themselves on inequality since the introduction of the SDGs, attaining reasonable levels of internal validity as a result of a triangulation approach and reliability from the use of a coding dictionary. However, more research is needed to draw robust conclusions from the findings and increase especially the internal validity. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has considerably impacted the discourse of the 2020 HLPF meeting, and it seems to be exacerbating existing inequalities worldwide (Berkhout et al., 2021). This could become an opportunity for increased attention on inequalities, but it could also shift all of the focus towards the most pressing issues such as SDG 3 (Good health and well-being) (Naidoo & Fischer, 2020). To truly know whether SDG 10 has had any effect on the discourse as well as the global inequality dynamics, it might be necessary to simply

allow the 2030 Agenda to run its course. Despite this, it is safe to say that if the findings from this research are extrapolated for the coming 10 years, the future of achieving SDG 10 and the worldwide fight against inequality is looking rather bleak.

Further research

There are many possibilities for further research that will complement and strengthen the validity of this particular study on the steering effects of SDG 10. Some possibilities include research on the HLPF as an institutional framework, an extended discourse analysis, and continued research on the discourse of the HLPF over the coming ten years of the 2030 Agenda. These will be outlined here.

HLPF as an institutional framework

During the expert interview, Professor Chasek highlighted three structural aspects of the HLPF that can be linked to the progress of the goals, as well as the processes behind the discourse of the HLPF on inequality. These would be interesting starting points for future research that would further the understanding of the effects of institutional processes on the progress of SDG 10.

1. The HLPF has to keep an overview of the large number of SDGs that are part of the 2030 Agenda and has to follow up on the implementation of all of them. This is made manageable by grouping the goals into clusters; however, by looking at these clusters, there is no keeping track of the interlinkages between them and the concept of a unified agenda. This leads to gaps between the goals and subsequently, cross-cutting issues that are being overlooked. Inequality often falls through these gaps, as a lack of progress on the inequality goal can be a limiting factor for goals outside of the cluster in which SDG 10 is grouped.

2. There is a weakness in the diversity of professional disciplines from which delegates are represented during the HLPF. The predecessor of the HLPF, the CSD, did include a variety of ministries at its beginning; however, this devolved to delegates only from environment ministries or development ministries. With the installment of the HLPF, there was renewed hope that the diversity of the 2030 Agenda would lead to a wider range of expertise in the delegates. Nevertheless, similar to the devolvement at the CSD, the current delegates are mostly from environment ministries or development ministries. The SDGs and the HLPF are still seen as an environment or development agenda, despite the goals encompassing almost all areas of government. This leads to a lack of expertise on the goals that are outside of the scope of the delegates, of which SDGs 8, 9, 10, and 16 are examples.

3. A lack of constituency also presents a problem for some goals, including SDG 10. As opposed to many of the goals which have dedicated agencies within national governments as well as within the UN body itself, SDG 10 is not housed within any particular agency. This also plays into the aforementioned shortage of expertise; without economic ministries present, the discourse on inequality is determined by people without expertise on inequality, and without the explicit objective to make progress on inequality.

Extended discourse analysis

Since there are many more source materials available on the discourse of the HLPF, an extended discourse analysis could provide more internal validity. For this research, the VNRs of nations provide a perfect case study opportunity to study the positions of nations further. Another option is a discourse analysis of all statements submitted during the HLPF, which are available on the UN website. The reports of the ENB that were analyzed in this research did not contain these statements in full, instead the gist or the most important part of the statement is written down in the report. This means some nuance of the statements may have

been lost in the reports of the ENB. Performing such a case study of VNRs or analysis of full statements could provide more insight into the results of the research done in this paper and give a more nuanced and accurate representation of nations' positions on inequality.

Coming years

Lastly, it would be interesting to see how the discourse on inequality continues over the coming years as well as how global inequality dynamics develop. There are 10 more years to achieve the SDGs and measure their progress, two-thirds of the total timeframe of the 2030 Agenda. According to the UN, the 2021 HLPF will again have SDG 10 as one of the discussed SDGs, as it did in 2019. This will lend itself for a comparison between the HLPF of 2019 and 2021, to see whether this focus on SDG 10 will again lead to a significant increase in inequality being a topic of discourse. Performing an additional discourse analysis on the reports from the 2021 HLPF meeting will therefore further elucidate the role of focus SDGs and show whether the year 2020 was an outlier in terms of the discourse during the HLPF meeting, or whether the COVID-19 pandemic has a longer-lasting impact on the focus of the HLPF, and if so, if this impact will also include a focus on exacerbated inequalities.

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10. Appendix

This table consists of all statements that are coded as part of the discourse analysis. The statements are sorted by year and color coded to reflect the coding dictionary. The colors correspond with the following codes:

General economic inequality
Vertical economic inequality (in line with SDG 10)
Vertical economic inequality (outside the scope of SDG 10)
Horizontal economic inequality
Inequality, general/unspecified
Wealth redistribution

2016
Panelist Ion Jinga, Permanent Representative of Romania to the UN and Chair of the 54th session of the Commission for Social Development, stressed the importance of SDG 10 (reducing inequality).
Pinheiro noted the session's special relevance to SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); 10 (reduced inequalities); and 12 (responsible consumption and production).
Panelist Tim Jackson, Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, presented data indicating that economic growth delivers the biggest prosperity gains among the poorest communities, with diminished returns beyond a certain income threshold. He said this presented a strong moral case for rich countries and communities to make room for poorer countries and communities.
Discussant Wellington Chibebe, International Trade Union Confederation, underlined the importance of collective bargaining for inclusive growth
She also expressed concern that SDG 10 (inequality) does not have a "mother agency" or ministry to ensure its implementation.
Raveloharison noted the need for inclusive growth to avoid triggering crises.
The World Bank highlighted readiness to support renewable energy infrastructure and a poverty study in Egypt that addresses inequality.
Workers and Trade Unions emphasized the significant economic costs of inequality, and the importance of social dialogue.
CHILDREN AND YOUTH, on behalf of all MGoS asked: Germany and Finland, about reducing inequality
The Deputy Minister for Multilateral and Global Affairs, Republic of Korea, underlined rising global inequalities and prolonged conflict as key challenges to leaving no one behind; and highlighted, among other initiatives, the country's air ticket levy, which contributes to a global poverty fund.
Inviting speakers to reflect on the meaning of inclusion, moderator Lisa Foster, US Department of Justice, said the recent shootings in the US were a painful reminder of the inequality challenges facing her country.
Presenting the 2016 GSDR, Under-Secretary-General Wu noted that it is "an assessment of assessments" prepared through an inclusive process to strengthen the science-policy

interface for sustainable development. He described the focus of the 2016 GSDR on, inter alia: ensuring no one is left behind; the nexus between infrastructure, inequality and resilience; inclusive institutions, including national sustainable development councils; and technologies to meet the SDGs.

Respondent Sarah Mendelson, US Representative to ECOSOC, stressed the need to raise awareness in her country of the SDGs as a transformational opportunity to address inequalities.

UN General Assembly President Mogens Lykketoft called on Member States to fully utilize the potential of the HLPF, and urged tackling root causes of current challenges such as inequality, exclusion and youth unemployment.

Panelist Hugo Roger Martínez Bonilla, Minister of Foreign Affairs, El Salvador, said his country is pioneering the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by addressing inequality and vulnerability through public policy, despite many challenges.

Simón Gaviria, Minister for National Planning, Colombia, presented his country's VNR, saying the SDGs had been integrated into the national development plan in June 2015, before the 2030 Agenda was adopted; a high-level commission has been set up to ensure effective implementation; and the SDG targets have been integrated into the 2017 national budget. Norway asked about Colombia's approach to align its post-conflict strategy with the 2030 Agenda. Spain requested information about the role of the private sector in Colombia's national development plan. Together 2030 requested clarification on how Colombia plans to overcome political tensions. In response, Gaviria highlighted: the contribution of civil society; plans to engage with and regulate investors; and efforts to address inequality

recognizes: the importance of peace and security for sustainable development; that factors giving rise to violence, insecurity and injustice such inequality, corruption, poor governance, and illicit financial flows are addressed in the 2030 Agenda

The 2030 Agenda was adopted against the backdrop of immense global challenges—including high levels of poverty and hunger, rising inequality, the refugee crisis, a rapidly warming world, and growing insecurity.

Panelist Onalenna Selolwane, Mosadi Khumo – SocioEconomics Empowerment Forum for Women, stressed the importance of retaining a significant portion of wealth where it is created.

2017

Bárcena stressed: equality as a driver of growth

Highlighting an annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth of almost 4% from 2010-2015 in her region, Aida OpokuMensah, UN Economic Commission for Africa, said challenges include: data gaps; inequality; illicit financial flows; and weak public institutions.

Lead discussant Deborah Greenfield, International Labour Organization, identified decent work and universal social protection as critical drivers of poverty and inequality reduction.

Discussant Patrick Ho, China Energy Fund Committee, listed infrastructure, technology, and investment as three key elements to achieve SDG 9, saying these elements should promote economic prosperity, equity, and environmental sustainability.

Presenting the VNR for Chile, Marcos Barraza, Minister of Social Development, said that while only 11.7% of his country's population are poor in terms of income, 29% of people are in multi-dimensional poverty. He described four priorities in his country's efforts to achieve the SDGs: sustainable and inclusive economic development; reducing inequality;

addressing climate change and environmental protection; and bolstering institutions and democracy.
lead discussant Claire Melamed, Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, highlighted the importance of: robust institutional frameworks at the highest governmental levels as well as local levels; broad social policies, which support a range of people, together with narrow social policies that target individuals; effective economic policies that reduce inequality; and knowledge and data.
In response to questions from THAILAND, CANADA, and CHILDREN AND YOUTH, Kishida responded that his country is: finding ways to reduce inequality
Discussant Donovan Guttieres, Major Group for Children and Youth, said STI should support the 2030 Agenda and not reinforce existing inequalities.
Panelists also raised, inter alia: the interface between traditional and modern knowledge, and science; the generalization and aggregation of knowledge as necessary for implementation of the SDGs; the widening gap between developed and developing countries with regard to new and emerging technologies
ECOSOC President Shava called for solidarity and cooperation to address key global challenges such as extreme poverty, inequality, conflicts and terrorism, and climate change.
UN Secretary-General António Guterres said the 2030 Agenda could make globalization fair
Shava, along with the ECOSOC Vice Presidents, presented main messages from the previous week. He highlighted: the increasing role of regional cooperation; improvements in intersectoral coordination and mainstreaming at the national level; and persistent inequality.
Lahcen Daoudi, Minister Delegate to the Head of Government in charge of General Affairs and Governance, Morocco, highlighted poverty eradication, good governance, and equality as priorities for sustainability in the Western Asian region.
Martijn Visser, Youth Representative for Sustainable Development, called on his country to prioritize education, climate action, and equality
Presenting the VNR for Chile, Marcos Barraza, Minister of Social Development, said that while only 11.7% of his country's population are poor in terms of income, 29% of people are in multi-dimensional poverty. He described four priorities in his country's efforts to achieve the SDGs: sustainable and inclusive economic development; reducing inequality; addressing climate change and environmental protection; and bolstering institutions and democracy.
Presenting the VNR for Panama, Maria Luisa Navarro, Vice Minister of Multilateral Affairs and Cooperation, highlighted a sustained reduction in poverty levels, and in rates of malnutrition and hunger, but said that persistent inequality calls for targeted interventions in priority areas.
Presenting the VNR for Cyprus, Nikos Kuyalis, Minister of Agriculture, underscored that despite an unprecedented economic crisis, his country remains "on a good course" to meet the SDGs. He highlighted the introduction of a national healthcare system that will improve utilization of resources and quality of care, and reduce inequality.
Against the backdrop of high poverty and "astounding inequality," growing instability, and a dangerously warming world, at HLPF 2017 many wondered if the Forum is up to the task of confronting today's considerable sustainable development challenges head-on?
Akhtar stressed: addressing trade distortions; regional cooperation and integration; global sustainable and quality growth; and redistribution of income and wealth and resource mobilization, including through domestic means.

Panelist Janet Gornick, City University of New York, highlighted drivers of high poverty levels, including market income inequality and meager state redistribution.
Lead discussant Eugenio Diaz-Bonilla, International Food Policy Research Institute, stressed that a universal poverty-based safety net would cost less than 0.1% of world GDP.
Underscoring "we don't need resources, we need honesty," lead discussant Andrés Mideros, National Secretary of Planning and Development, Ecuador, called for addressing tax evasion at bilateral and multilateral levels.
Panelist Janet Gornick, City University of New York, highlighted drivers of high poverty levels, including market income inequality and meager state redistribution.
Noting the presence of immense wealth but major inequality in the world, Jeffery Sachs, Earth Institute, Columbia University, identified obstacles to progress, including: vested interests, for instance of the oil, coal, and gas lobbies; "belligerent leaders" that perpetuate conflict; and an absence of "big, bold thinking."
Globalization's "mixed record" was also highlighted by Jeffrey Sachs, Director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, who called for "big, bold thinking" in the face of today's "stunning and unprecedented inequality," where eight men own as much wealth as half the world's population combined.
2018
WOMEN said the climate change crisis and gender injustice are rooted in an economic model that engenders inequalities and violence.
MAURITANIA underscored the need to consider SDG 11 together with SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) in implementation.
The EU expressed support for inclusive growth, trade, and regional integration.
ILO said inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic growth can spur job creation.
Lead discussant Sofia Monsalve Suárez, FIAN International, noted the lack of sufficient data to assess inequality, both within and between countries. She cautioned that the way "big data" is being compiled and used does not always respect human rights or serve the intention of the SDGs.
Panelist Mohamed Ali Alhakim, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, underlined regional challenges, including: gender inequality; a youthful population in a region of slow economic growth; exposure to fluctuating oil prices; shrinking access to international finance; inequality; and coastal urbanization.
Panelist Olga Algayerova, UN Economic Commission for Europe, described: economic inequalities; water scarcity; significant levels of youth unemployment; and worsening environmental trends in the region.
Panelist Kaveh Zahedi, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, said the region's best efforts to achieve the SDGs are falling short, with the exception of education. He highlighted: the deterioration of ocean health; high greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; and inequalities exacerbated by environmental degradation and disasters.
Moderator Norma Munguía Aldaraca, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mexico, called for efforts to address the inequalities brought about by rapid technological change,
Moderator Karin Fernando, Center for Poverty Analysis, Sri Lanka, highlighted several challenges of urbanization such as governance issues, pollution, inequality, and heightened vulnerability to disasters

Panelist Felipe Castro Pachón, National Planning Department, Colombia, highlighted challenges faced by MICs, including their diversity, density of population, and levels of inequality.
Bárcena presented the report for the ECLAC region, highlighting the importance of implementing the 2030 Agenda at a time of weakening multilateralism, emerging protectionism, fiscal consolidation, public mistrust in institutions, political fragmentation, rising inequalities, and a looming trade war.
Léo Heller, Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, called for a further incorporation of human rights, including the affordability principle and the treatment of inequalities in disaggregated data.
UN General Assembly President Miroslav Lajčák said there are causes for celebration but more causes for concern, citing worsening global inequalities and climate change impacts.
Presenting the VNR for Latvia, Arvils Ašeradens, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Economics, highlighted: a stable and growing economy; increasing employment; progress in meeting climate change targets; and technological solutions to address linguistic barriers. Among challenges, he emphasized inequalities with a territorial dimension, requiring out-of-thebox solutions.
Namibia: Obeth Kandjoze, Minister of Economic Planning and Director-General of the National Planning Commission, highlighted: decreasing inequality
Presenting the VNR for Bhutan, Lyonpo Namgay Dorji, Minister of Finance, and Thinley Namgyel, Secretary, Gross National Happiness Commission, discussed the integration of SDGs into a transitional development plan as the country graduates from LDC status in 2023. They highlighted: regional disparities in levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment;
Spain: Teresa Ribera, Minister for the Ecological Transition, Josep Borrell, Minister of Foreign Affairs, EU and Cooperation, and Cristina Gallach, High-Commissioner for the 2030 Agenda, highlighted: high levels of inequality and youth unemployment
UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted achievements towards the 2030 Agenda, including improvements in reducing maternal and child mortality, and access to electricity. He said, however, that, at the same time, there are areas where countries are lagging or backtracking in areas fundamental to the shared pledge to leave nobody behind. He highlighted runaway climate change, conflict, inequality, persistent pockets of poverty and hunger, and the need to address gaps opening up during an extraordinary expansion of the economy.
Andrew Gilmour, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and a number of others noted, while pointing to strains in the multilateral system and looming trade wars. They quoted data that indicates entrenched inequality, increases in the numbers suffering from hunger, and stagnant ODA.
Keynote speaker Jeffrey Sachs, Columbia University, said greed and the vested interests of coal, oil, and gas companies are the biggest obstacle to the achievement of the SDGs. He called out the global food industry's unsustainable supply chains and unhealthy products. Citing overlapping rankings at the top of sustainable development and happiness tables, he noted that sustainable development promotes well-being and happiness, while tax cuts for the rich undermine essential dimensions of the SDGs. He called on rich countries and individuals to address the US$200 billion shortfall in funding required to achieve the SDGs, by: increasing ODA; using 1% of the wealth of the world's 2208 billionaires; closing down off-shore tax havens; taxing the five big global technology monopoly companies; taxing financial transactions; a global carbon tax; and measures to tackle wholesale tax evasion.

Rapporteur Alicia Bárcena, ECLAC, commenting on energy, cities, and MOI, called for more attention to critical linkages across the SDGs. She noted the importance of land, water, and access to energy to address poverty and inequality, and wealth redistribution.
Global wealth remains concentrated in the hands of just 1% of the global population
Panelist Vera Songwe, UN Economic Commission for Africa, noted the return of economic growth in the Africa region alongside increasing inequality and absolute poverty
Daniel Bunda, student from Slovakia, highlighted low levels of income inequality;
Armenia: Ararat Mirzoyan, First Deputy Prime Minister, described "revolution" as an SDG accelerator that has removed the single largest barrier in the country—the lack of political will. He highlighted safe drinking water, health, clean energy, DRR, equal rights for women, income inequalities, and regional partnerships as key priorities.
2019
IRAN called on states to refrain from promulgating unilateral economic measures.
SWEDEN emphasized the need for a multidimensional measure of poverty to reduce inequality.
During the discussion, BELIZE, for the ALLIANCE OF SMALL ISLAND STATES (AOSIS), noted the paucity of resources to break the poverty and inequality cycle in SIDS, due to the priority given towards climate adaptation and disaster recovery.
HAITI, for CARICOM, highlighted the challenges faced by SIDS, especially those related to climate change and the lack of finance for tackling inequality, biodiversity loss, and natural resource management.
ZIMBABWE emphasized the need for social dialogue to ensure inclusive and sustained economic growth.
INDONESIA said earmarking funding for rural areas was an effective way of decreasing urban-rural inequality
Identifying ways to tackle inequalities, SWEDEN highlighted social protection floors; policies enabling inclusive and sustainable growth; and multilateral cooperation on migration.
NEPAL called for support from the international community in addressing SDG 10, particularly for vulnerable countries.
The EU described its commitment to policies that foster inclusive growth, reduce inequality, and address discrimination.
VIETNAM noted policies to reduce inequality, such as preferential access to credit and social welfare benefits to 2.6 million people.
GERMANY highlighted that reducing inequality is more important for eradicating poverty than economic growth.
Who is at risk of being left behind? Moderator Nikhil Seth, UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), highlighted the lack of progress made on reducing inequality between countries.
Panelist Fekitamoeloa Katoa 'Utoikamanu, UN High Representative for the LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS said most LDCs and LLDCs are unlikely to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030, and identified high inequality and natural disasters as challenges.
Lead discussant Madeleine Zúñiga, Global Campaign for Education, stressed the importance of addressing diversity to increase the quality of education and cautioned that private education may further exacerbate inequality.

Panelist Eun Mee Kim, Ewha Womans University, Republic of Korea, said inequalities in education undermine poverty alleviation efforts, and called for the elimination of systemic and institutional barriers in the education sector.
Matthew Martin, Development Finance International, presented an analysis showing that the majority of countries "vastly ignore" SDG 10 in their national development plans, and called on the UN to appoint an SDG 10 focal point.
Panelist Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, The New School, said the Committee for Development Policy found that SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) was the least mentioned in the VNRs presented so far; and "leaving no one behind" has become more rhetoric than reality, as it lacks concrete measures and strategies.
Boris Greguška, Chair, UN Forum on Forests (UNFF), presented key messages from UNFF 14, including: forests have a key role in combating climate change; many of the world's poorest people depend on forests, and securing forest tenure is a prerequisite for reducing poverty and inequality
José Antonio Ocampo, Chair, UN Committee for Development Policy (CDP), presented the highlights of the CDP report, including: • current levels of inequalities within and between countries are unsustainable, with many not just being left behind, but being pushed behind
Ali Ahmadov, Deputy Prime Minister, said the World Economic Forum ranked Azerbaijan third among developing countries in a classification on inclusive economic development; and the World Bank ranked the country among the top ten reformers for ease of doing business in Europe and Central Asia in 2018.
Chile: Alejandra Candia, Vice-Minister, Social Development, highlighted a national-level consensus building exercise on issues such as comprehensive development, public security, and human rights to achieve inclusive growth; a "public-private alliance" to develop solutions; and South-South cooperation for technical assistance and capacity building.
Tanzania: Philip Mpango, Minister of Finance and Planning, described: a focus on industrialization, inclusive economic growth, human development, and public-private partnerships;
Mauritania: El Moctar Djay, Minister of Economy and Finance, said the National Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity 2016-2030 is aligned with the 2030 Agenda, and focused on economic diversification, inclusivity, and eliminating inequality, including through cash transfers for the poorest.
FINLAND emphasized the need to address employment and equal opportunities for marginalized communities worldwide.
THAILAND reported progress in reducing inequality through a focus not only on the poor, but also on vulnerable groups such as the elderly and people with disabilities.
The EU described its commitment to policies that foster inclusive growth, reduce inequality, and address discrimination.
Panelist Edwin Cameron, Constitutional Court of South Africa, said SDG 10 requires the elimination of discriminative laws and policies that criminalize marginalized groups
Lead discussant Nalini Singh, Fiji Women's Rights Movement, underscored the need to eliminate systemic discrimination based on age, gender, sexual orientation, and disability through measures that address income discrimination.
INDONESIA highlighted the importance of information and communication technology (ICT) in reducing inequality
NEPAL highlighted inequalities perpetuated by the caste system, which hampers SDG implementation.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES called for equality, sustainability, inclusion, accessibility, and sustainability to be core principles of full and decent employment.
FINLAND supported wage standards and collective rights to reduce inequality.
POLAND stressed the importance of childcare benefits in reducing inequality
Providing comments, panelists called for a focus on employment in urban areas to reduce inequality
MEXICO supported disaggregation of data, to identify groups affected by inequalities.
The EU described its commitment to policies that foster inclusive growth, reduce inequality, and address discrimination.
MOROCCO described a national monitoring mechanism that utilizes data based on different social and economic categories of the population to reduce inequalities.
ECUADOR emphasized human mobility in urban and rural development strategies and called for a focus on how migration interacts and shapes inequalities
WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS underscored addressing the needs of workers in the informal sector to tackle inequality.
Lead discussant Vuk Žugić , Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, highlighted conflict prevention and peace building; good governance and corruption prevention; environment-related security challenges; and inclusiveness and addressing inequalities.
NIGERIA called for inequality, corruption, illegal financial flows, and illicit arms flows to be addressed.
MEXICO highlighted the risk of new technologies increasing inequalities.
Panelist Emanuela del Re, Deputy Minister, Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy, said access to justice, effective rule of law, transparent and effective institutions, and fundamental respect for human rights are prerequisites for peaceful and prosperous societies. She noted the need to break the cycle between insecurity, injustice, and inequality.
Rodrigo Malmierca Díaz, Minister of Foreign Trade and Foreign Investment, Cuba, presented key messages from the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development, saying 144 priority indicators have been identified for the region, and equality remains a key challenge.
Nouri Al-Dulaimi, Minister of Planning, Iraq, said the Arab Forum of Sustainable Development acknowledged the slow pace of SDG implementation in the region, and sought inventive solutions, particularly related to priority areas such as inequalities, increasing poverty levels, weak economic growth, high unemployment rates, climate change, wars, conflicts, occupation, and displacement.
Elliott Harris, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, presented key messages from the UN Secretary-General's reports, saying: • inequality is multi-dimensional and increasing; • countries need to build strong and inclusive institutions and effective mechanisms for stakeholder participation in SDG implementation; and • the international community needs to capitalize on the potential of frontier technologies to accelerate SDG implementation, including by protecting biodiversity hotspots, while mitigating risks to the labor market and widening inequality.
Summarizing key messages for the SDG Summit, Rapporteur Gloria Amparo Alonso Másmela, Minister of National Planning, Colombia, said the strong country ownership of SDGs was evidenced by the 142 VNRs presented, with 15 countries presenting twice; the national actions on the SDGs; local-level reflection; and budgetary allocations for the SDGs. She listed challenges, difficulties in long-term planning, awareness building, and resource mobilization. On ways to accelerate actions, she emphasized education, reducing

inequalities, providing decent work, scaling up climate action, and ensuring peaceful and just societies.

Palau: Sinton Soalablai, Minister of Education, reported on universal access to quality health care; achievement of 98% school attendance; reduction in poverty and malnutrition; reduced gender, ethnic, and rural-urban inequalities; and increased regional and global partnerships.

Rwanda: Claudine Uwera, Minister of State of Finance and Economic Planning, Rwanda, highlighted: 5% growth rate in the agriculture sector, with further efforts to intensify crop farming to support food security; a shift towards integrated and anticipatory disaster risk management; efforts to tackle high rates of stunted growth; a decline in inequality; and a commitment to improve the quality of education.

Responding to questions, the delegation described the indicator framework to monitor the well-being approach; and emphasized a commitment to overcoming challenges such as low SDG visibility, inequalities, and domestic violence.

Turkmenistan: Batyr Bazarov, Minister of Finance and Economy, reported: 84% of SDG targets are reflected in national policies; access to affordable, high-quality medical services; enlisting of 17 youth ambassadors for SDGs; free primary and middle schools; reduction of rural and urban inequalities; afforestation programmes to combat climate change; and action plans to combat human trafficking and corruption.

Highlighting increasing carbon emissions and rising inequality as "counter-transformations," Nebojša Nakićenović, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), listed six focus areas as pathways to transformational change:

Panelist Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Committee of Experts on Public Administration, emphasized the role of effective governments and public institutions as enablers of SDG implementation, calling for acceleration and agility of government-led actions to empower citizens and ensure equality.

Panelist Isabelle Pypaert-Perrin, International Movement ATD Fourth World, said dialogue on inequalities must involve marginalized communities, so they can contribute to solutions for inclusive and sustainable societies.

Panelist Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner, Wales, UK, noted the inability of governments to think beyond electoral and budgetary cycles, listing areas where future impacts are clear but are still not being addressed, such as ageing, climate change, and urbanization. She called on governments to address inequalities not only on the basis of where people are born but also on when they are born, saying Wales is the only government in the world with a Future Generations Commissioner to hold government to account for the impact of current decisions on future generations.

Lead discussant Doreen Bogdan Martin, International Telecommunication Union, said half the world's population is not connected to the internet, and growth rates are slowing at the bottom of the pyramid where connectivity is most needed for inclusion and equality.

Summing up, Elliott Harris, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, reiterated: • the key role of equality in unlocking the potential of the other goals; • the multi-dimensional nature of inequality; • the role of demographic trends in driving inequalities; • the vicious cycle created by long-entrenched inequalities and denial of human rights; • the importance of transparency, predictability, and accountability, especially in national budgets; • access to technology and capacity to all countries and all citizens; • the potential of climate change to exacerbate inequalities, and the need for "just transitions;" and • the need for all voices to be heard while drafting policies.

Keynote speaker Lucas Chancel, World Inequality Lab, said ending extreme inequality directly shapes the ability to end extreme poverty. He identified taxation as a major

challenge in reducing inequality, and worried that low corporate taxes were being balanced by taxing consumption of the middle class.
Panelist Isabelle Durant, UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), called for fair trade that benefits the entire supply chain, noting that while the volume of global trade has multiplied by five times in 30 years, the benefits are distributed unevenly.
Panelist Charles Kenny, Center for Global Development, said the use of technologies such as robotics and artificial intelligence can enable increasing production and generate wealth required to achieve the SDGs; and fair taxation regimes can ensure equal distribution of benefits.
NORWAY highlighted the importance of centralized wage bargaining in ensuring even income distribution
NGOs called for progressive taxation to address wealth concentration and increasing inequality.
income inequality (SDG 10, reduced inequalities) is on the rise;
Panelist Robin Ogilvy, Special Representative and Permanent Observer of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to the UN, highlighted persistent gender income gaps, stark economic inequality,
panelist Alicia Bárcena, UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN ECLAC), said regions such as the Asia-Pacific and Africa are not on track to achieve the SDGs. She identified high unemployment and high wealth inequality as challenges for Latin America; and urged addressing the needs of refugees and migrants in the Arab world.
Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Natural Resources and the Environment, Samoa, highlighted key messages from the mid-term review of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway. She emphasized: Pacific innovations, including a regional peer review of Vanuatu's VNR and joint reporting on the 2030 Agenda and the SAMOA Pathway; challenges such as inequitable growth and high vulnerability; and the need for strengthened capacity for implementation.
Warda Rina, Asia Pacific Regional Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Engagement Mechanism, highlighted the need to address inequality of wealth, power, and access to resources, and called for better linkages between regional forums and the HLPF.
resenting a global statistical snapshot of SDG 10, Benjamin Rae, UN DESA, said income inequality is on the rise, with the bottom 40% receiving less than 25% of overall income, and an increasing share of income going to the top 1% in many countries.
Panelist Máximo Torero Cullen, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), called for improving access to markets and diversification of income sources for the poorest to tackle income inequality.
UN Secretary-General António Guterres said four years after the 2030 Agenda was adopted, the picture is discouraging: a handful of men own as much as half of humanity;
Burkina Faso: Lassane Kabore, Minister of Economy, Finance, and Development, reported an income inequality rate of 35.5% and a 40.1% poverty rate, jeopardizing social cohesion and exacerbating conflict.
Kazakhstan: Zhaslan Madiyev, Vice-Minister, National Economy, said: 80% of the SDG targets are integrated in government plans and strategies; human capital is a priority, with 99.8% of citizens over 15 years of age having received education, and 54.3% holding higher education degrees; plans are underway to increase the income of 40% of the poorest by 2025; and Kazakhstan has become a nuclear-free state.
BANGLADESH urged a focus on income disparities.

2020
The REPUBLIC OF KOREA said the Korean New Deal consists of a digitalization component and a Green New Deal component, to align short-term recovery measures with the longer-term goal of transitioning to an inclusive, low-carbon economy.
Resource person Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Africa, and Coordinator of Regional Commissions, said the pandemic demonstrated that existing GDP-based country classifications are not applicable in every situation, as MICs and small island states reliant on sectors like tourism and oil production were severely affected, irrespective of their income levels. She noted the need to: revive economic sectors and build back better; address inequalities to leave no one behind; and tackle the current volatility and uncertainty without resorting to austerity
Resource person Ibrahim Assane Mayaki, former Prime Minister of Niger, called for well-being, job creation, resilience, inclusiveness, and equity as measures of success, instead of GDP.
The second VNR for Panama highlighted a national focus on: creating inclusion; fighting poverty and inequality; investing in education and health; and addressing social equality among vulnerable communities.
In response to questions, Bolaños-Argueta highlighted: her government's comprehensive decarbonization plan, with an ecosystem focus; efforts to tackle inequality through robust employment options; and a multi-dimensional planning approach that reflects Costa Rica's achievements in social policy.
more inclusive economy
Presenting the second VNR for Niger, Ahmat Jidoud, Minister of Budget, noted progress in reducing infant mortality, combating desertification, and addressing climate change. He said key lessons learned were on the importance of: ensuring inclusive development; communicating and disseminating information; ensuring sustainable use of resources; and maintaining strong economic growth.
Presenting the first VNR of the Federated States of Micronesia, President David W. Panuelo, with other delegates, highlighted: traditional practices and knowledge, and protection of natural heritage as values underpinning the country's development plan; work to mainstream climate change into all policies; support for women's participation in decision-making; and commitment to the rule of law and equal opportunities for all.
SWEDEN expressed commitment to ensuring that stakeholders' voices are heard in the HLPF, saying "when civic spaces close, inequality becomes less visible."
The STAKEHOLDER GROUP OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES said inclusion has been disrupted by the pandemic, inequality is deepening, and discrimination is rising. The EU underscored the need to address inequalities by empowering people, ensuring opportunities, and taking a rights-based approach for sustainable recoveries
A civil society representative from BOTSWANA urged addressing the inequalities exposed by the pandemic.
Moderator Manish Bapna, World Resources Institute, pointed to: the uncertainties surrounding the duration and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; the inequities caused by it; and the urgency of ensuring that responses are transformative.
Resource person Refat Sabbah, Global Campaign for Education, said the pandemic has uncovered the need for the 2030 Agenda to address justice and equality
UN Secretary-General António Guterres attributed the devastating impact of COVID-19 to past and present failures in: taking the SDGs seriously; addressing inequalities; investing in resilience; empowering women and girls; heeding warnings about the damage

to the natural environment; addressing climate change; and valuing international cooperation and solidarity.
regional inequalities
In response to questions, Jidoud described: measures undertaken to ensure meaningful participation of all stakeholders in the VNR process; strategies adopted to promote awareness of the SDGs among all relevant stakeholders; and specific initiatives taken to reduce inequality and discrimination against marginalized groups.
Presenting the VNR for Papua New Guinea, James Marape, Prime Minister, reported significant progress across many SDGs, including on improving transport connectivity, health, education, community development, life expectancy, maternal and infant mortality, literacy, and reducing extreme poverty. He noted the challenge of reducing widening inequalities.
Presenting the first VNR for Liberia, Augustus J. Flomo, Deputy Minister for Economic Management, said a national development plan and legislation, including the Land Rights Act and Local Governments Act, was adopted in 2018 to address entrenched inequality and economic deprivation.
Preexisting systemic and structural inequalities both within and between countries have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The poorest and the most vulnerable, including women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, and informal sector workers, are disproportionately affected.
NICARAGUA urged politicians to take corrective actions to redistribute wealth.
Lead discussant Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), called for redistribution policies and universal social protection systems.
NICARAGUA said the predicted automation of 40% of jobs by 2035 will exacerbate extreme inequality and called for country-driven models to support job creation.
Resource person Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director, UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), highlighted extreme global wealth inequality while calling for a "people's vaccine" against COVID-19, with priority access for health workers and vulnerable groups.