



2023 United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

Young Diplomats of Canada

July 10-19, 2023

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Overview

The United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was established in 2012 by "The Future We Want" outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). The format and organizational aspects of the Forum are outlined in General Assembly resolution 67/290. The Forum meets annually under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) for eight days, including a three-day ministerial segment, and every four years at the level of Heads of State and Government under the auspices of the General Assembly for two days.

Four youth leaders from Canada represented the Young Diplomats of Canada (YDC) at the forum: Kimberly Watada (Head Delegate), Nico Han (Engagement Coordinator), Joe Noss (Communications Coordinator) and Topaza Yu (Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator). The YDC is a national, non-partisan, non-profit youth-led organization that promotes the leadership of young Canadians through international delegations, research projects, and advocacy initiatives. Each delegate brought a unique set of expertise and lived experiences to the forum, ranging from Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression (ARAO), Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), international relations, engineering, finance, and clean energy.

As Canadians, we have a critical role to play in this global initiative. The forum provides an invaluable opportunity to demonstrate leadership, offer guidance, and shape policies that will advance the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda during the Decade of Action and Delivery.

Delegation Priorities

The priority of the delegation was to represent the Canadian youth perspective, maximize learning from other countries and delegates, and engage other Canadian youth through delegation deliverables and communications.

This year, Canada presented its second Voluntary National Review (VNR) of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the HLPF. To participate in this process as Canadian youth, we attended the official presentation of the VNR, interacted with the Canadian delegation, and asked questions through networking events hosted throughout the HLPF.

We also sought out numerous opportunities to learn from other delegates from different countries. This included attending side events hosted by various countries and meeting other delegates at the conference. Gaining exposure to international perspectives at the conference was a key component of enriching our experience and knowledge gain.

Finally, we conducted in-depth research on the SDGs to produce delegation deliverables to engage Canadian youth with our conference experience. These deliverables include SDG research briefs, op-eds and a podcast on Canadian and international progress to meet the SDG targets.

Achievements

Stakeholder Meetings

- We had a meeting with **Bob Rae**, Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, at the Permanent Mission of Canada. The purpose was to gain insight into Canada's efforts to promote sustainable development, both domestically and internationally. Additionally, we took the opportunity to express our viewpoints and ideas on how Canada can enhance its COVID-19 recovery efforts.
- We had the privilege of meeting with **Minister Gould**, who held the position of Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. Our aim was to better understand Canada's initiatives in advancing sustainable development both at an international level and within the country itself. Moreover, we took the chance to hear the insights on how Canada has effectively contributed to the elimination of children in poverty in the wake of various circumstances, a key issue for youth delegations.
- We met **Rebecca Bell**, a Senior Policy Analyst at Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and learned about how Canada critically engages with UN conferences to advance its national goals. We also thank GAC for granting the official passes to our youth delegates.
- We had an insightful meeting with the representatives of "**Developing Young Leaders of Tomorrow, Today**" (**DYLOTT**)'s **Black Diplomats Academy**. Our interaction revolved around understanding the organization's mission and initiatives aimed at nurturing the potential of young leaders. Through a productive exchange of ideas, we delved into DYLOTT's strategies for empowering and equipping the youth with the necessary skills and knowledge to become effective leaders in the future.
- **The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)**'s **Emily Kroft** provided training for our delegation on the SDGs prior to the forum. Through this training, we gained insight into IISD's tools and multidisciplinary approach, which encompasses various sectors such as energy, natural resources, climate change, and trade. The organization's emphasis on finding practical, evidence-based solutions to complex sustainability issues was particularly notable.
- We met virtually with the **Network of Former Youth Delegates to the United Nations** prior to the forum. The organization's founder, **Ramiz Bakhtiar**, shared with us his

first-hand experience as Afghanistan's First Youth Delegate to the UN in 2018-2019, and shared tips on networking and advocacy at the UN from a youth perspective.

- While at the forum, we engaged in meaningful discussions with multiple national Indigenous representatives, representatives from provinces and territories, mayors, Canadian non-governmental organizations, academics, and other stakeholders.

Diversity and Inclusion

An Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive (ARAO) lens was applied to all levels of our work to ensure the values of diversity and inclusion were honored and practiced. Anti-racism and anti-oppression means unlearning colonial structures deeply ingrained into our society and being mindful of the conscious and unconscious ways we enable them. ARAO also means that we utilize strategies and practices that challenge and counter racism and systems of oppressions.

Some of ways our team applied and practiced using a ARAO lens includes:

- Ensuring youth voices were heard, respected, and implemented accurately into our work.
- Actively engaged with other youth leaders and civil organizations across Canada to learn from their lived-experiences.
- Connected with youth leaders to build stronger networks and provided them with resources when needed.
- Critically reflected on how our own biases and beliefs impacts our decision making process, and actively finding effective ways to implement an ARAO lens to all levels of our work.

Op-ed

Canada's Progress on the SDGs

Canada is a global leader in sustainable development. However, it has failed to achieve the progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that we planned in 2015. While we are halfway to 2030, nations have only achieved 12% of the SDGs. The 'good', 'bad,' and 'ugly' of Canada's recent review of its progress can serve as a guide to other countries trying to achieve the SDGs.

Before diving into the report Canada provided to the UN on July 19th 2023, it is first important to describe how the UN monitors SDG progress. In 2015, UN member-states agreed to 17 SDGs

to achieve by 2030. The SDGs included goals like “Good Health and Well-being” (SDG 3), “Decent Work and Economic Growth” (SDG 8), and “Climate Action” (SDG 13). For each SDG, there are specific targets that countries need to achieve, such as “End Open Defecation and Provide Access to Sanitation and Hygiene” (SDG 6, Target 2). Each target has key metrics that the UN uses to track progress, such as the % of the world that “has a hand washing facility with soap and water available at home” (SDG 6 Target 2 Indicator 1a) which is currently at 75%. In turn, the SDGs serve as a shared global framework countries can use to track and report on their development. Importantly, countries' progress towards these goals is voluntary, meaning that citizens in each nation must understand these goals and push their governments to enact policies that achieve them. Comprehension of the SDGs by the average person is critical to their progress.

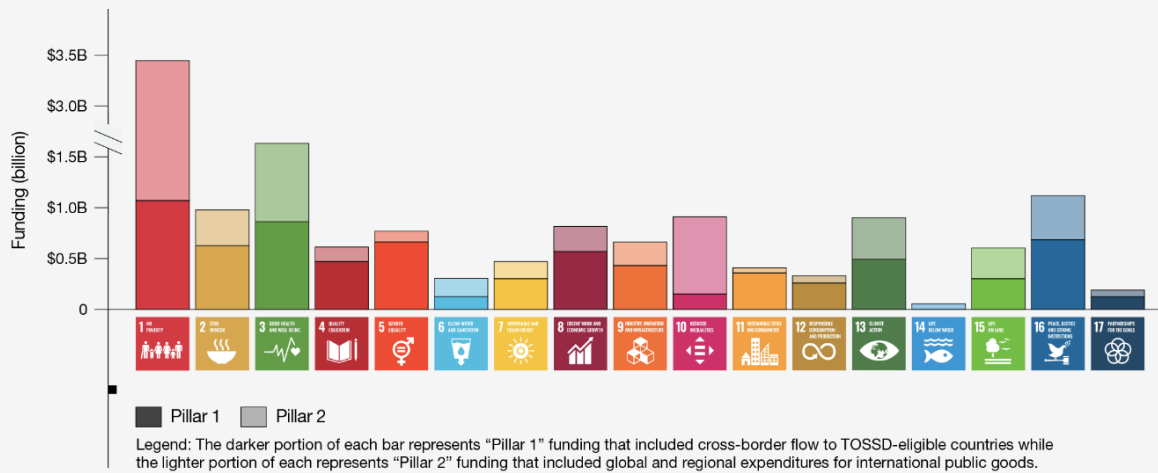
Every three years, countries provide a ‘Voluntary National Review’ (VNR) on their SDGs progress at the UN. These reviews are managed by each country’s public service, and are not mandated. There are a few issues with this model; each nation presents the information in a different way and there is no auditing of any country’s reporting. In turn, nations can choose to paint a rosier picture than what is actually going on, a problem the Romanian Minister of Economic Development highlighted in his speech to the General Assembly. This year, Minister Karina Gould presented Canada’s VNR, a comprehensive report that can be found [here](#).

Canada’s VNR serves as a guide to other nations in terms of structure, but also the realities of achieving the SDGs. Canada is a wealthy nation with a government that takes the SDGs seriously. Even in that context, we have failed to make the progress we need to ensure we achieve all of the 2030 targets. If we can’t do it, can any country?

The Good:

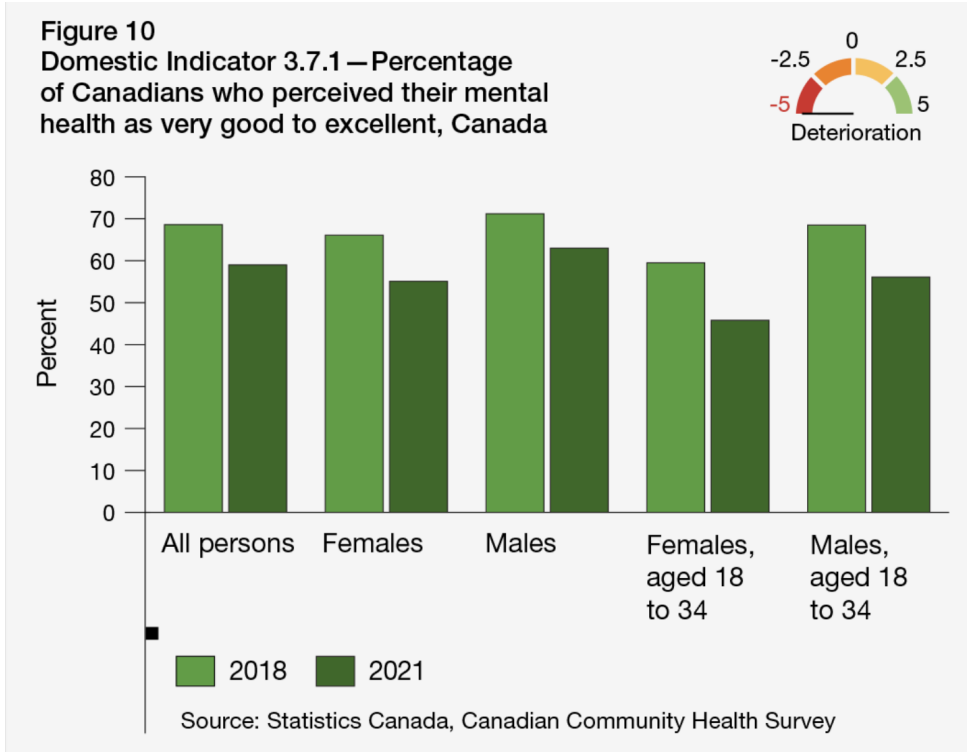
The overall structure of Canada’s VNR is accessible, easy-to-follow, and is realistic about the nation’s progress. Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) took the lead on the report’s development, gathering data from other ministries to develop the report. ESDC collaborated with Statistics Canada to ensure that each SDG included an associated quantitative indicator to reflect our progress.

Figure 1
Canada's support to the Sustainable Development Goals



Canada made impressive progress on SDG 1: No Poverty, SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 5: Gender Equality, and SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation. Policies like Canada's Child Benefit, and Global Affairs Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy, have helped to place Canada on a path to achieving their 2030 targets on these goals. At the same time, this Government's commitment to engaging with Indigenous communities has helped to improve access to clean water.

In areas where Canada's progress had slowed, or even dropped since 2015, the VNR presents this information accurately. For example, on SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being, the report acknowledges how Canada has a lot of work to do in terms of Indicator 3.7.1, the percentage of citizens who perceive their mental health as very good to excellent, as we have experienced an across the board reduction in mental health since 2018.

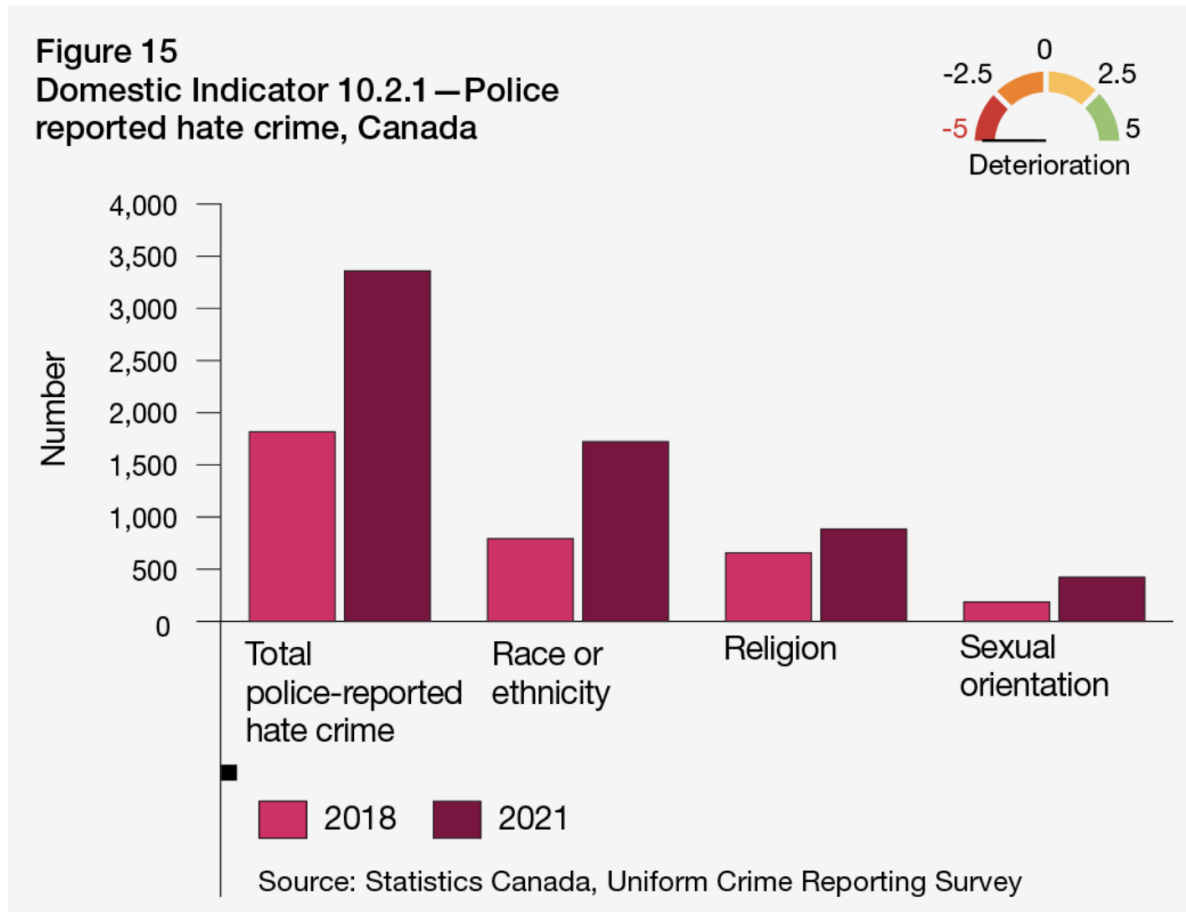


The Bad:

Another gap is found with SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, which is focused on housing. Within the report, the government explains how the “proportion of those living in core housing needs has decreased” from 26.8% in 2016 to 20% in 2021. At the same time, the VNR describes Canada’s progress on SDG 11 as “on track” given this decrease. The statistic is real, it fails to reflect the challenges everyday Canadians are experiencing today in the context of housing. Countless opinion polls and news articles highlight Canada’s Housing Crisis and explain its many causes. Instead of painting a balanced picture, the VNR lauds the Federal Government’s spending on housing, while the small section on “challenges and opportunities” to SDG 11 only mentions transportation. In turn, other nations reading the VNR see a much more positive picture of Canada than truly exists. Overall, the VNR is honest and comprehensive in its description of Canada’s progress on achieving the SDGs, but the section on housing fails to achieve this standard.

Finally, the Government’s ambitions for SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions are focused on ensuring Canadians have equal access to justice. The VNR acknowledges that there is still substantial work to do to achieve this goal. For example, an indicator the report mentions is the proportion of Canadians who are “not confident” in police or the justice system by identity group. “While the percentage of Canadians with confidence in the justice system has increased between 2021 and 2022,” Indigenous people expressed having no confidence in the

justice system at a rate almost two times greater than that of non-Indigenous people. Challenges to progress on SDG 16 was also reflected by the increase in hate crimes seen in Canada from 2018-2021, with an almost 150% growth over those three years.



The ‘bad’ of the VNR report is in some ways promising. While the issues Canada faces are serious, and much work is to be done if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030, the challenges Canada has are surmountable. Through a focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and housing, Canada can make the required push to get these SDGs back on track.

The Ugly:

Achieving the SDGs requires sustainable growth across the globe. This sustainable growth requires energy and resources. For example, the widespread use of electric vehicles (EVs) in Canada is necessary to minimize the emission of greenhouse gas and achieve SDG 13: Climate Action. Scaling EV production involves increased mining and extraction of the critical minerals that EV batteries need. In turn, achieving this goal through EV production likely requires the

destruction of the environment, impacting SDG 15: Life on Land. The interconnected nature of the SDGs and the extractive systems we live in make it almost impossible to achieve the SDGs by 2030. When we make progress on one SDG, it can often undermine our progress on another. To achieve the SDGs by 2030, Canada and citizens of the world more generally need to work to change the larger systems that govern the economy and facilitate development.

Without changing these systems and the paradigms that people view the world through—such as re-evaluating our emphasis on ideas like ‘growth’ and GDP as the most important economic indicator—achieving the SDGs will remain out of reach.

All in all, Canada’s VNR was a success, and its shortcomings reflect the underlying tensions that exist at an institution like the UN. Countries like Canada have good intentions and believe in the SDGs, and citizens across the world do want their governments to work collaboratively towards these goals. However, achieving the SDGs by 2030 requires a re-evaluation of the global system, something few governments are ready for or even able to take seriously.

Podcast

To summarize our learnings from the HLPF, our delegation put together a podcast titled “Will Canada meet its Sustainable Development Goals?” in collaboration with Beyond the Headlines, a one-hour current affairs radio show housed within the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy.

One of our delegates, Kimberly Watada, was the host of the podcast and interviewed each member of our delegation with a range of questions related to Canada, the SDGs, and our experience at the HLPF. The final podcast episode was a deep dive into Canada’s progress to meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the role Canada can play in both domestic and international affairs. This experience was valuable in summarizing our learnings from the HLPF as delegates, while also engaging listeners with a topic we believe is valuable for Canadians to know more about.

Advice and Recommendations for Future Delegations

Planning and Intention-Setting

From the advice of the HLPF delegation before us, we spent our first few meetings defining our delegation objectives and creating a detailed timeline of our deliverables. This was especially helpful in scoping our role as a delegation and keeping track of all the deliverables we wanted to complete. The timeline of deliverables was made on Excel and tracked the progress of each item as it was completed.

Research

During the research phase of our preparation, we found it helpful to prepare internal briefing notes on the five SDGs that were emphasized at this HLPF: SDG 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 7 on Affordable and Clean Energy, SDG 9 on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities, and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals. Each SDG was assigned to a delegate, who then prepared a 1-2 page note summarizing their research on the SDG. By sharing these notes within the delegation, we were more prepared to learn from and engage with the SDG-based content at the HLPF.

Communications

Our team primarily used WhatsApp and email for communications. We had two Whatsapp groups: one with the YDC executives and our delegation, and another for just the delegation. The former group was used for deliverable communications, while the latter group was for informal communications during and after the HLPF. Email was mainly used for formal email communications with external stakeholders.

Delegation meetings were held on Zoom and occurred at biweekly intervals for the first month, and weekly for all succeeding months.

Forum Participation

We planned to arrive a day before the conference began and stayed at an Airbnb we booked in Queens. Our accommodations were conveniently located on the subway line and had a half hour commute, making it a more affordable stay. Arriving a day earlier was intended to allow us to attend the early morning opening ceremony on the next day, however, our flights were delayed due to bad weather, causing us all to arrive the day the conference began.

Despite the delay in our arrival, we were able to quickly and easily pick up our delegate passes from the Canadian Permanent Mission near the UN headquarters. These delegate passes denoted us as members of the official Canadian delegation, which was significant as this was the first year that YDC delegates were granted this status. With this delegate pass, we were able to use the delegate entrance to the UN headquarters, saving wait time in getting through the general entrance, and gaining access to most areas within the UN headquarters. Having these delegate passes also lends credibility to our presence at the HLPF, as the majority of diplomats in attendance at the HLPF had these passes. As official members of the Canadian delegation, we were also invited to the Canadian delegation reception, which was an excellent networking experience for us. Overall, these delegate passes were a key component to streamlining and

improving our delegate experience, and it is recommended that future YDC delegations seek to obtain these passes as well.

The side events at the HLPF were well documented in a detailed Excel sheet created by the forum organizers, and this was very helpful for when we selected which events we wanted to attend. While the sheer amount of options were a bit overwhelming, many side events were run in parallel, meaning that if there was one event you wanted to attend, you would not be able to attend the others at the same time. Thus, if you prioritize the side events and topics you are most interested in, the list of options becomes much clearer.

Most of our interactions with youth came from the “Youth at HLPF” Whatsapp group, which contained over 200 youth from around the world. Here, information about youth-related side events, meetups, and relevant youth opportunities were posted. This was helpful for staying up-to-date with content during the HLPF and meeting up with other youth during our time in New York.

Key Forum Sessions Attended

July 10:

Overcoming the crisis, driving transformation for the SDGs, and leaving no one behind
SDG 17 and interlinkages with other SDGs - Partnerships for the Goals

July 11:

Region to Region: Engineering approaches to scale the Clean Energy Transition
SDG 6 and interlinkages with other SDGs - Clean Water and Sanitation

July 12:

Urban Regeneration: International Perspectives Towards Achieving the SDGs
Meeting with Canadian Ambassador to the UN Bob Rae
SDG 7 and interlinkages with other SDGs - Affordable and Clean Energy
SDG 9 and interlinkages with other SDGs - Industry, innovation, and infrastructure

July 13:

Sustainable Management of Water for Sustainable Development For All

SDG 11 and interlinkages with other SDGs Sustainable Cities and Communities

Overcoming middle-income countries' challenges in advancing the 2030 Agenda

Presentation of Indonesia on building a new renewable-energy capital city

July 14:

Voluntary National Reviews: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Comoros, Liechtenstein, Zambia

Voluntary National Reviews: Barbados, Rwanda, Vietnam

Voluntary National Reviews: Burkina Faso, Cambodia

July 17:

Fireside Chat featuring GSDR scientists

A Holistic approach to transitioning toward more comprehensive, resilient, sustainable, and climate friendly energy systems

SDG 9 in middle-income countries: Accelerating the achievement of the 2030 Agenda

General Debate: Building momentum towards the SDG summit

Voluntary National Reviews: Democratic Republic of Congo, Guyana, Romania

July 18:

Leveraging Social Innovation to advance the Sustainable Development Goals

Voluntary National Reviews: Bahrain, Belgium, Croatia, United Republic of Tanzania

Voluntary National Reviews: France, Lithuania, Singapore

July 19:

Voluntary National Reviews: Canada, Poland

Delegate Reflections

Kim Watada

Head Delegate

The opportunity to attend the HLPF as a YDC delegate arose right after I graduated from my chemical engineering degree at the University of Toronto. Having spent many work terms and classes on exploring sustainability from the engineering and finance perspectives, I wanted to learn more about the nuances of policy and international cooperation in sustainable development. From the HLPF, I was keen to explore these themes and understand the effectiveness of the UN as a platform for driving change.

I entered the HLPF with some skepticism on how conducive the forum would be to catalyzing sustainable action. This was in large part affirmed by many of the main sessions that took place at the HLPF; countries that presented tended to reiterate their commitment to the SDGs without giving any tangible examples to lend credibility to their words. I found that many key challenges, such as the need to direct more international financing to sustainable development, were repeatedly posed without any substantive solutions. However, things became much better after we started attending the side events. In general, countries hosting side events went much more in-depth in their actions, giving tangible examples and policy recommendations towards advancing the SDGs in their country. This seemed to be valuable for knowledge sharing to those in attendance and I learned the most about how different countries handled the SDGs from these sessions. As such, I have concluded that it is important to understand the expectations on what is to be achieved from the HLPF. This is not the place for a landmark agreement like the Paris Agreement, or for lobbying for great change in other countries. As the platform for the follow-up and review of the SDGs, the HLPF is all about knowledge sharing, and by understanding this, the structure and motivations of this UN forum became much clearer. Policy and international cooperation remains a challenge for sustainable development, and is oftentimes a limiting factor for action, but the HLPF indicated that change is forthcoming alongside optimism for the future.

Nico Han

Engagement Coordinator

Coming from an academic background in international relations, I attended the UN HLPF for the first time with the YDC delegation this year. We witnessed exciting dialogues and high-level speeches, but we also saw many challenges faced by the UN despite it being one of the world's

most important international organizations. There were often opinion-clashes between international commitment and national interest or priorities; countries need to work in fluctuating power dynamics with huge regional disparities where delegates from different countries often talk past each other; countries also face resources constraints and the lack of enforcement mechanisms for SDGs goals, in addition to sustainability being a complex global issue that require an extraordinary amount of coordination efforts. On top of this, we had also noticed that some countries tend to use the forum to reclaim credits for their own achievement, and their speeches were often tinted by a political undertone against the background of the geopolitical tensions.

However, through my experience, I also came to understand that this is a forum where countries at least have an equal and legitimized voice to participate and persuade through mechanisms such as the Voluntary National Review. It is also an open forum where opposing views are exchanged and enunciated. It also offers a rare chance where non-state actors, including research institutes or NGOs like us, were able to sit in the room where things happen. I found some of the most illuminating and stimulating comments coming from academia, seasoned field workers from NGOs, and indeed youths. Youths offered some most critical comments and the audience tended to lend generous attention to them when youths spoke. Hence, one of the biggest takeaways for me is that the inclusion of youth is like a breath of fresh air that is both exhilarating and necessary for a sometimes stale environment. We all share the responsibility to create a better future.

Joe Noss

Communications Coordinator

Throughout High school and college, my extracurricular focus was on Model United Nation (MUN). MUN is such an incredible beast that takes experience to fully understand, but is in some way a combination of competitive debate and Lord of the Flies, with students working collaboratively to solve some of the world's greatest issues, while battling it out for the title of Best Delegate. I have made countless friends, and a number of enemies, through MUN, and experienced some of the most rewarding and challenging weekends of my life. Given this consistent interest of mine, it has always been a dream to see the real United Nations in action. And over the past week, I had the privilege of visiting the UN as a member of the Canadian delegation through the organization Young Diplomats of Canada.

All in all, my time spent at the UN was consistently compelling, but not necessarily for the reasons I first expected. The UN General Assembly, like most political institutions in this world, is

often a venue for empty platitudes rather than decisive action. However, this reality in no way changes how incredible the UN is – with all of humanity's limitations, there is a building where every single nation in the world peacefully sends representatives to discuss the issues we all face. I was consistently blown away by this degree of diversity and the kind people I met walking the halls. So there was definitely a lot of good, in terms of the genuine interest people have in making positive change, but there were also clear limitations, in terms of how much impact the UN could actually make.

Topaza Yu

Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator

As a Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression (ARAO) consultant and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) advocate, the HLPF provided me with the space to further my learning in ARAO, SRHR, and the intersections between them. The forum was an environment for connecting with other bright-minded youth leaders from across the globe and a place for youth voices to be heard. As I reflect on my experiences at the HLPF, there are two takeaways. The first takeaways from the forum was the idea that the “Personal is still Political”, it is critical for policy makers to acknowledge the influence certain policies have on individual lives.

The second takeaway is the idea of “Nothing for Us, Without Us”. This is a principle that I apply to all levels of my own consultation and advocacy work. This principle means that the people around you inform your work so that it reflects their experiences and needs. This is essential for historically marginalized groups, as they are often disproportionately impacted by different systems of oppression such as racism and sexism. I had the pleasure to have worked closely with the YDC team and my delegation, where everyone had unique lived experiences and knowledge to share. I look forward to continuing my work with the UN spaces and how we can positively impact the SDGs!