

HLPF 2026 Side Event Summary Report:

Prosperity through decent work: Connecting water, energy, cities and infrastructure to a sustainable and equitable jobs agenda

13 July 2026

1. Background

Co-organized by UNDP and the ILO, this high-level side event at the 2026 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) addressed the structural challenge of why economic growth is leaving many workers behind, and how development investments can be made more tangible in people's daily lives. The session focused on how the SDGs under review (SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17) can serve as practical foundations for decent work when investments in water, clean energy, infrastructure, sustainable cities and partnerships are deliberately designed to raise productivity, create quality jobs, expand social protection, strengthen resilience and reach those most at risk of being left behind. The session provided clarity on the following core questions and policy directions:

- **Deliberate Design:** How investments in water, energy, infrastructure and cities can be designed not only to build assets, but also to create decent jobs, improve livelihoods and strengthen resilience.
- **Policy Integration:** How countries can move from sector-specific projects to integrated programmes that connect employment, social protection, skills, climate resilience, local enterprise development and financing.
- **Reaching the Vulnerable:** How public policy, social dialogue and partnerships can ensure that investments benefit women, young people, informal workers, local enterprises and communities exposed to poverty, exclusion and crisis-related shocks.

2. Opening Remarks and Keynote Address

Cynthia Samuel-Olonjuwon, Special Representative to the UN and Director of the ILO Office for the UN, opened the session by emphasizing that investments in water, energy, infrastructure and cities are not only about building assets; they are investments in people's lives, livelihoods and future opportunities. She stressed that these investments do not automatically translate into decent work, reduced inequalities, stronger resilience or expanded opportunity. Achieving these outcomes requires deliberate policy choices that connect economic investment with employment promotion, social protection, skills development, fundamental principles and rights at work, and social dialogue. She also highlighted the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions as a concrete example of how different ministries, social partners, development banks, the UN system and other stakeholders can align nationally owned reform agendas around decent jobs and universal social protection.

Alexander De Croo, UNDP Administrator, delivered the keynote address, stating that "development must be made tangible" by changing people's daily lives, including through jobs that allow people to support a family and build a future. He highlighted a sobering gap: over the next 10-15 years, 1.2 billion people in developing countries will enter working age, while current trends suggest only 400 million jobs will be created. He also noted the reality of the working poor, underscoring that too many people are trapped in jobs that do not provide a pathway out of poverty. The Administrator emphasized that decent jobs depend on policy and investment choices, including whether jobs

provide adequate income, safe working conditions, social protection, and opportunities for local businesses, women and entrepreneurs. He also drew a bridge to crisis and resilience, noting that emergency aid saves lives, but development creates the future; even in crisis settings, support to livelihoods, entrepreneurship, private sector recovery and cash-for-work can help communities move beyond “endless assistance.” He pointed to renewable energy and technology as important enablers, including solar-powered innovation hubs and decentralized grids in Papua New Guinea that have created jobs in hard-to-reach areas, and framed AI as “augmented intelligence” that can accelerate human talent when designed and governed in the right way. He introduced UNDP’s Jobs for Prosperity offer and the Prosperity and Wellbeing Hub as vehicles to reduce fragmentation and work with governments, civil society, the ILO, the World Bank, investors and the private sector to place decent jobs at the core of development.

3. High-Level Dialogue: Country Experiences

Mandeep Dhaliwal, Director, Prosperity and Wellbeing Hub, UNDP, moderated the high-level dialogue. Building on the opening remarks, she recalled the scale of the challenge highlighted in the 2026 SDG Report and the discussion: 280 million working people remain in extreme poverty, while young people aged 15-24 were described as twice as likely as adults to be among the working poor. High-level officials shared country experiences on how planning, financing, infrastructure, energy, social protection and local development can be brought together to improve both the number and quality of jobs.

- **H.E. Yusuf Murangwa**, Minister of Finance and Economic Planning of Rwanda described Rwanda’s shift from sector-specific planning toward cross-sectoral government policies. He emphasized that successful integration requires clarity on cost-effective priorities, medium-term planning, better information on sequencing and dependencies, and a realistic understanding of the resources required, including finance, time, institutional capabilities and skills. He also stressed the importance of coordinating government, development partners and civil society around shared objectives. Rwanda’s experience showed that sectoral approaches can deliver results, but often at high cost and with inefficiencies. By contrast, integrated investments in areas such as water can simultaneously support household access, irrigation, livestock, hydropower, solar power, food production, logistics, jobs, ecosystem management and inclusion of vulnerable groups, including women and youth.
- **H.E. Ahmed Rostom**, Minister of Planning and Economic Development of Egypt, emphasized the need to shift from a narrow focus on growth to the quality of growth, with productive employment and decent jobs embedded in national planning and investment decisions. He highlighted Egypt’s integrated development vision, including the Haya Karima programme, which localizes development by bringing quality water, sewage and sanitation, energy access and finance to underserved areas, thereby linking public infrastructure to job creation at the local level. He also stressed the importance of focusing on sectors that drive growth, including agricultural productivity, rural livelihoods, renewable energy, value chains between local communities and urban hubs, digital innovation, ICT and logistics. Egypt’s experience also pointed to the role of integrated national financing strategies, public-private partnerships, South-South cooperation and a revised FDI strategy in ensuring that every investment delivers multiple development benefits.
- **H.E. Enea Karakaçi**, Minister of Infrastructure and Energy of Albania, described Albania’s development model around tourism, energy and agriculture, and highlighted the role of

infrastructure in creating spillovers for local enterprise development. He noted that roads connecting small villages have helped expand family-owned agritourism and local businesses, supporting a more authentic and locally rooted tourism model. On energy, Albania is largely powered by renewable sources and is now diversifying beyond hydropower into solar. Incentives and local-content requirements have helped create a domestic photovoltaic value chain, with Albanian companies moving into engineering, procurement, construction and related services. He also cited the development of new airport infrastructure alongside an aviation academy to train air traffic controllers, pilots and flight attendants, illustrating how infrastructure can be linked to skills, expertise and higher-value employment. Albania's experience underscored the importance of moving beyond low-cost labour toward quality growth, technical capabilities and higher-skilled industries.

- **H.E. Md. Zonayed Abdur Rahim Saki**, State Minister of Planning of Bangladesh, emphasized that Bangladesh's budget and planning agenda now focus not only on creating jobs, but on making work decent through workplace safety, living wages and social protection. He argued that development projects must move from piecemeal interventions to integrated programmes and clusters of complementary projects, so that infrastructure is matched with the workforce, equipment, services and institutions needed to deliver results. He cited Bangladesh's LEED-certified factories and labour reforms, while noting the need to extend protections to informal workers. Bangladesh is treating social protection as economic infrastructure, including through a Family Card programme intended to provide people with the confidence to take the risk of pursuing better jobs, small enterprises or urban opportunities without fear of catastrophic loss. He also highlighted infrastructure for inclusion, digital financial inclusion and skills platforms, locally led adaptation and resilience, and governance reforms to improve coordination across ministries and between central and local government as Bangladesh prepares for LDC graduation.
- **Mayra Jiménez**, Director, Supérate Program of the Dominican Republic, presented the Supérate model as an example of social protection linked to economic inclusion, skills and pathways to decent work. She noted that the Dominican Republic's progress on poverty reduction has been supported by strong articulation between social protection and employment generation. Supérate reaches vulnerable households through subsidies and support for food security, persons with disabilities, women facing violence, older persons and families with children in school, while also connecting households to technical and vocational training, financial education, soft skills and entrepreneurship programmes. She emphasized the importance of inter-institutional and intersectoral coordination, particularly with labour and technical training institutions, so that families receiving social protection can progressively move toward employment and out of poverty. She also highlighted the care economy as both a social right and a source of formal job creation, with opportunities to professionalize and formalize work historically unpaid or undervalued, including through social security coverage. Finally, she underscored the role of adaptive social protection in a climate-vulnerable island context, where shocks can push households back into poverty without integrated and anticipatory support.

4. Stakeholder Perspectives: Rapid Reflections

Laurel Patterson, Head, Strategic Partnerships, Crisis Prevention and Response, UNDP, moderated the stakeholder perspectives and rapid reflections segment, bringing in views from social partners, youth, research and financing institutions on how integrated approaches can move from policy commitment to implementation.

- **Anne-Cécile Coly**, Vice President, L'Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes du Sénégal, stressed that social dialogue is not an add-on to development policies, but a condition for their success. She argued that when workers and their organizations are involved from the outset in shaping investments in infrastructure, energy and urban development, these investments are more likely to create decent jobs, uphold labour rights and respond to the needs of people and communities. Drawing on Senegal's experience, she highlighted the role of the Global Accelerator roadmap in bringing government, workers' organizations, employers and partners around common priorities, including decent job creation and expanded social protection. She also noted the importance of institutionalizing social dialogue before major investment decisions are made, including in reforms that extend social protection to informal workers and strengthen protections related to maternity, violence and harassment at work.
- **Mahlet Zeleke Redi**, Global Focal Point, Global Youth Caucus on Decent Work and Sustainable Economies, Major Group for Children and Youth) highlighted that water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are not only basic services, but foundations for education, employment and economic opportunity, especially for girls and young women. She noted that gender-responsive WASH infrastructure in schools, universities, factories, markets, transport hubs and workplaces can create jobs in engineering, construction, maintenance, sanitation services and local entrepreneurship, while also enabling women and young people to remain in education and work. She called for investments that connect infrastructure with skills development, social protection, digital skills, apprenticeships, financing and meaningful youth participation. Her central message was that young people are ready to move from consultation to implementation, and that job-rich investment should be measured not only by the number of jobs created, but also by whether those jobs are productive, decent, inclusive and accessible to young people.
- **Mine Yoichi**, Executive Director, JICA Ogata Research Institute, introduced the Human Security Dashboard, which uses 66 indicators across four dimensions: survival, livelihood, dignity and environment. He framed human security as freedom from fear understood broadly, including fear of losing a job or income, falling ill without assurance of support, or being unable to give children a better chance in life. He emphasized the value of data and visualization to understand overlapping human security challenges and improve project design. Drawing on JICA experience, he also noted that investments such as water supply facilities and public transportation have both intrinsic value for human security and instrumental value for inclusion, livelihoods and gender equality.
- **Marta Cali**, Senior Policy Advisor, UN Joint SDG Fund, explained that catalytic financing is most effective when it creates a foundation for system change. She described financing as part of an "architecture for change" that can de-risk partnerships, align policies and ministries, and create an enabling environment for larger investments. Modest grants can therefore serve as multipliers when they bring together national leadership, Resident Coordinator Offices, UN technical expertise and partners around a shared national vision. She cited examples from the Global Accelerator and related Joint SDG Fund work, including efforts in Pakistan to position the care economy as an engine of decent job creation and formalize health and care workers; in Indonesia to connect skills development, apprenticeships and adaptive social protection in a single jobs roadmap; in Malawi to align agriculture, commercialization, labour markets and social protection; and in Bangladesh to support sustainable startup growth and entrepreneurship.

5. Closing Remarks

Laurel Patterson concluded the session by reinforcing the need for integrated policy solutions to deliver on the promise of decent jobs. Across the discussion, speakers underlined that sectoral investments can generate stronger development outcomes when they are linked from the outset to decent work, social protection, skills, resilience, local enterprise development, public-private partnerships, social dialogue and financing. The event demonstrated the importance of moving from fragmented projects to country-led, integrated approaches that make development tangible in people's lives.

For more information, including the agenda and recording, please access the [event page](#).