

PERMANENT MISSION OF THE KINGDOM OF BHUTAN TO THE UNITED NATIONS

WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR GENERAL DEBATE

HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT OF THE ECOSOC HLPF, 14-17 JULY 2020

Theme: Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realising the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. This year's HLPF is convened against the backdrop of the decade of action for sustainable development, and as the international community continues to reel from the devastating impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic.
2. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing fragilities in our world and within societies, the challenges our peoples face resulting from high levels of inequality, inadequate health coverage and social protection, and climate change. The economic consequences of the pandemic continue to adversely affect the livelihood and wellbeing of our peoples, affecting the poorest and most vulnerable amongst us the hardest. Our hard-earned development gains are under threat of being pushed back further behind.
3. The vision of Gross National Happiness provides the framework for our social contract with the people of Bhutan. Under the leadership of His Majesty the King, Bhutan has sought to ensure that the vital components of that social contract are fulfilled, so that all Bhutanese may realise a more secure, sustainable and prosperous future. And in the time of the COVID crisis, it has become more evident than ever that this is not possible without universal health coverage, a tenet that has long been central to our national development strategy. While the incidence of confirmed cases has been relatively low, Bhutan today remains in a state of high vigilance. Rigorous surveillance, containment and prevention, for countries such as our's is the only option in the face of devastating public health consequences of COVID 19.
4. A recent study undertaken by UNDP revealed the socio-economic impact of the COVID crisis in Bhutan is already deep, wide-spread and cross-cutting. The tourism and allied sectors were the first and worst hit. Tourism, which employs around six percent of the population, makes up for around nine percent of Bhutan's GDP, next to hydropower which accounts for slightly more than 11 percent. Construction and transport sectors are also severely affected, and youth unemployment, exacerbated by the return of those previously employed overseas, is on the rise.
5. In order to overcome the present economic disruptions and with a view to stabilize the economy and stimulate growth, a number of fiscal relief measures have been introduced, focusing particularly on the most vulnerable segments of society. Implementation of the ongoing National Development Plan activities will be accelerated wherever possible, with front-loaded

investments, and with particular emphasis on revitalizing the rural economy and creating employment opportunities.

6. We cannot overlook that present circumstances and challenges afford opportunities to accelerate economic diversification and to address structural issues. In line with Bhutan's 21st Century Economic Roadmap, we will seize opportunities for strategic investments in the rural economy as a growing number of young people consider prospects of shifting to agriculture and other vocational sectors. Reform of TVET and investments in human capital will be leveraged as part of efforts to revitalize the rural economy. Investments in infrastructure across the agriculture value chain and re-skilling labour to build food and agro-industry is a priority. These are all critical areas that will enhance productive capacity and develop economic resilience that is vital to sustainable graduation and achievement of the SDGs.
7. While grappling with COVID-19, we must not forget the omnipresent existential dangers posed by climate change, a slower moving and yet more ominous threat to our planet, which comprises a disproportionate, and daily reality for LDCs. As we begin to build back better, our plans must embrace strategies that are smarter and resilient. When we emerge from the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, the new normal must embrace the interdependent health of people and planet. As trillions of dollars will be spent on recovery plans, stimulus packages and company bailouts, it presents tremendous opening for green recoveries to deliver stronger climate, sustainability, health and economic outcomes. We must ensure that measures deployed are aligned with the Paris Agreement, a 1.5 degree pathway and build resilience.
8. For Bhutan environment sustainability has been both the primary objective and the starting point for national development within the framework of GNH. Bhutan has always understood the solemn responsibility of living in harmony with nature and we will continue to stay the sustainable course. Bhutan remains convinced that economic progress and protection of our planet is not a zero sum game, and all must do their part to nurture and promote their mutual acceleration.
9. The way ahead is daunting. It is made all the more challenging by the ever-narrowing fiscal space available. As we chart our recovery measures, Bhutan is committed to ensuring that current investments play a catalytic role in achieving desired structural changes in the economy and that people remain at the centre of all our national efforts towards achieving a more inclusive, harmonious, green and sustainable future. Bhutan remains committed and stands ready to do its part. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with the international community in pursuit of a transformative pathway for people, planet, and prosperity, that will lead us all to realise the future we want, the future we need.
