It was a wonderful experience being at the UN for the HLPF. I feel very privileged.

I am conversant with the Universal Periodic Review but was ignorant on what the HLPF is. I thought that is something for people like Sr. Elsa who are so conversant with the workings of the UN. I learned that it was set up to monitor the SD when they were formulated in 2015. The SDGs are now in their 4th year.

At the UN protocol is very strict but ECOSOC personnel spoke of the way privileges that they had are being whittled away and of the need for vigilance. NGOs have to fight to be heard. Structural determinants are shrinking the space for the NGOs. Last year member states threatened that NGOs were not to ask questions of the Voluntary National Reviews. Governments will not succeed in accomplishing the SDGs without the NGOs. The word “rule” on having to present content ahead of intervention at the Voluntary National Reviews is incorrect. There is no such rule. It would be a dangerous precedent to bow to the “rule” as it would disempower those coming for just the week of the VNRS.

Again and again we were reminded of the danger of big business with its vested interest hijacking the system through Goal 17 as many countries are beholden to big business for financing projects and giving material aid. Corporate greed can undermine so much goodwill. There is too much emphasis on $s needed rather than putting the emphasis on policies. $s from private sources means policy sidelined. It was noted that of the side events that were held within the UN 50+% were member states, 30% from UN Agencies leaving less than 20% for NGOs. It was also said that there is a new dynamic of power being removed from public accountability.

Water was the issue that caught my interest. Fresh water resource is finite. It is a scarce resource but it is not being treated that way. In Chile, water is so scarce that they are using nets on the mountains to catch water. One of the panelists at Water: the path to Agenda 2030 implementation, Mina from Australia is preparing to run 100 marathons in 100 days to highlight her 100% commitment to the achievement of Goal 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation. She invited us to join her at Central park at 6.00 a.m. each day, six highlight Goal 6. All SDGs are linked to water. It was an eyeopener to me to learn of a water crisis in Detroit and Flint. The poor pay more than the rich for water. I had heard this before and saw the reality of it in the Philippines.

How to define poverty with those left furthest behind. This side event asked: How can we develop the multidimensional, high-quality, reliable, and robust data needed to understand the complexity of poverty eradication solutions? Who are those defining the needs of the poor? Who should the policy makers talk to? What about a poverty that denies the dignity of people? Those at the bottom are often so oppressed that they cannot speak, feel shunned and often angry. Many of them do not like the term resilient as it implies that those who cannot cope are weak or lesser.

I went to the side event on Extrajudicial Killings. I was impressed that so many young people in the USA are members of ICHRIP - International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines. The path taken by the Philippines is being followed by Bangladesh and Indonesia and in Singapore, which has the death penalty for drug trafficking, the statute’s penal provisions are severe by most nations’ standards.

Women activists were very strong in their insistence that gender equality should be a target in each goal. It was new to me to learn that gender equality must include LGBT.

Overall it has been a wonderful time of learning for me and I have hope for the future because of the tremendous hard work, belief and dedication of the ECOSOC panelists and the Major groups coordinating mechanism who worked so hard over the two weeks.

Helen Lenehan