

Chapter 11

The High-Level Political Forum Review 2020: An Opportunity to Fulfill the HLPF's Mandate

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Reviewing the HLPF

The ambitious mandate of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is not yet matched by its ability to provide “political leadership and guidance” – its core mission – for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (UNGA, 2015) and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Doing so is especially important as we enter the “decade of action and delivery,” declared at the UN’s SDG Summit in 2019. The HLPF Review, officially launched in February 2020 at the United Nations, is an opportunity to take that mandate seriously and enable the HLPF to lead an evidence-based, coherent, and action-oriented agenda. The current political climate will not make that easy.

The HLPF is the main UN entity responsible for the follow-up and review of the SDGs. Given the centrality of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs to the UN’s entire work, the 2013 resolution launching the HLPF gave it a suitably ambitious mandate: political leadership, guidance and recommendations; follow up and review progress in implementing the SDGs; enhancing the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner, including through coordination and coherence across the UN system and at all levels of governance; having a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda; ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges; enhancing civil society participation and evidence-based decision making; and providing a platform for partnerships (UNGA, 2013).

Assessments of the lessons learned during the HLPF’s first four-year cycle since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda identify several *strengths*, including its provision of a platform for stock-taking and peer learning, especially the high level of participation in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) (Amanuma et al., 2019; Beisheim, 2018; De Burca, 2019; Hege, 2019; UN-DESA, 2019a). Because the 2030 Agenda focuses on national action, VNRs are a key mechanism for promoting bottom-up, country-driven processes to implement the SDGs.

These same assessments identified several *weaknesses*. Chief among them are the need to 1) improve evaluation and analysis of evidence-based inputs to better draw out policy lessons; 2) better promote interlinkages and coherence; and 3) provide better leadership and action-oriented recommendations. Although a major overhaul of the HLPF’s organization and format is unlikely, several viable steps can help to better match its ambition with results. While there are many proposals being debated, here we focus on specific recommendations in the three areas highlighted above (for a more comprehensive assessment of proposals see UNDESA, 2019b, and Beisheim, 2020).

Better Evaluation of Data before and after the HLPF

Review procedures and (statistical) reports from UN bodies, functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and other intergovernmental bodies and forums provide useful data to the HLPF. However, *analysis and evaluation* of the data for the specific

purpose of informing policy-relevant discussions at the HLPF and (ultimately) the implementation of the SDGs could be improved. As a result, “reports” are being presented rather than “reviews” that require analysis and evaluation. This applies, unfortunately, for the Thematic and SDG Reviews, and the VNRs.

The *Thematic Reviews* are an important feature of the HLPF but have been very uneven in practice. They provide amongst the best opportunities to analyze gaps, trade-offs, interlinkages and cross cutting issues. They also aim to link these analyses to the themes and values that underpin the SDGs, including leaving no one behind, human rights, financing and other principles of the 2030 Agenda. Although designed to provide an opportunity to support policy making and other measures, these reviews are not living up to their potential, especially in highlighting interventions that effectively manage relevant interlinkages.

There has also been unevenness in the individual *SDG Reviews*. As pointed out during the Expert Group Meeting in 2019 evaluating the first cycle of the HLPF (UNDESA, 2019a), these reviews should be prepared more systemically, drawing from various inputs to ensure discussions are evidence-based. They should also avoid diluting technical reviews of specific SDGs. Reviews that seemed to have worked best have been timed to link to processes, events or conferences in other parts of the system. Examples are the review of SDG 14, linked to the Oceans conference or of SDG 11, linked to the review of the “New Urban Agenda” taking place every four years (Beisheim, 2018). Here the analytical and preparatory work provided strong inputs and also a follow-up to the HLPF’s deliberations.

Hence, one problem is *effective sequencing*. As of 2019, the one-day Integration Segment of ECOSOC is held directly prior to the HLPF to process reports from ECOSOC’s subsidiary bodies and other inputs on the annual theme – but one day is not enough for such a complex task. The ECOSOC Review, taking place jointly with the HLPF review, provides a political opening to remedy this problem. For example, member states could adjust the ECOSOC calendar and reporting arrangements of its subsidiary bodies, an idea we build upon in our proposals below.

Moreover, there is also a disconnect between the existing preparatory meetings, such as Expert Group Meetings (EGMs) and other inputs listed above, and the review *panels* taking place during the HLPF. The panelists and panel discussions do not necessarily build on the preparatory meetings’ outcomes and recommendations. More generally, the panels have not focused enough on interlinkages and recommendations. In addition, new and emerging issues should be given more prominence. The result is that the good analytical and preparatory work being done (albeit still with areas for improvement including better use of country data) is not feeding into HLPF efficiently. These problems are a lost opportunity on many fronts, but especially for learning, mobilizing resources or drawing attention to key action items.

The *VNRs* also produce valuable data on implementation, as do regional forums or other expert or stakeholder reports, including data on who is left behind. The uptake of VNRs has exceeded expectations (158 VNRs so far, conducted by 142 countries, with 50 more VNRs expected in 2020, among them 27 first-time, 22 second-time and one third-time presenter/s). This high-level of participation is perhaps not surprising, though, given the prior decision by member states to not engage in a more formal, accountable, or systemic review processes (see also Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al. 2018). While there has been some peer learning, the ability for other countries to learn about transformative measures or assess needs or interlinkages has been limited. There is also wide variation in the openness of the VNR processes and the ability of stakeholders to engage with them more generally. As there is still little interest in having more robust – or actual peer – reviews amongst most member states, the question is how to best utilize reviews and encourage reporting countries to focus more on successes and challenges in realizing integrative and transformative practices. Moreover, it is also essential to better evaluate

the VNRs *after* they have been presented so as to draw out positive and negative lessons, identify areas where additional resources would benefit countries, or to match those needs to possible partners, financing or technology.

In sum, the annual HLPF meetings are failing to adequately consider inputs, the schedule is too packed, and the ideas and learning that goes on at regional meetings or other inputs from the system are not taken up sufficiently, especially into the HLPF's reviews and outcomes. Various analyses and stakeholders raised these concerns from the very beginnings of the HLPF as options for its form and function were debated (see Bernstein, 2013). It is thus not surprising these problems have come to pass (UNDESA, 2019a). However, from what we have observed in discussions and meetings with officials, diplomats, and stakeholders – despite many appearing to support a stronger and more relevant HLPF – only a few member states show political interest in extending the time devoted to meetings. Thus, we propose instead that options should be considered to improve integration and linkages with other parts of the system (ECOSOC's functional and regional commissions, funds and programs, other bodies and entities, specialized agencies, Forum on Financing for Development; and also reaching out to the international financial institutions) to improve the division of labor and to find ways to de facto improve workflows and provide more time for analysis and integration before the formal HLPF meetings.

Three proposals for how to achieve more effective preparatory and follow-up processes

1) Member states could decide, for example, to split the HLPF's sessions and hold a '*Spring Meeting*' earlier in the year. The results of this HLPF Spring Meeting could then feed into the negotiations of the Ministerial Declaration in June, which could include substantial recommendations to be discussed at the ministerial level during the July HLPF. Doing so would not necessarily require extending overall meeting time – a politically unpopular proposition – but instead foresees splitting the existing meeting days to better fulfill the HLPF's mandate.

For the Spring Meeting, the main messages of the Secretary-General's SDG report, the reports from the UN system, and from the VNRs should be available. The preparatory meeting could then focus more on evaluative reviews. The HLPF meeting in July would have panels building upon these reviews and the resulting recommendations in the Ministerial Declaration.

The discussions in July could then be more integrative and focus on cross-cutting issues, interlinkages, bottlenecks, and links to resources and other parts of the system. The July meetings could also invite presentations to showcase good practices coming out of regional meetings and discuss emerging challenges that need action. Splitting the meeting days in this way would also allow the July meeting to give greater consideration to what member countries and stakeholders find most useful based in part on what emerges from the Spring Meeting, thereby also facilitating more action-oriented outcomes.

2) A '*Sherpa*' for each main panel of the HLPF could be designated to curate an all-year preparatory process and bring relevant input and findings to the attention of panelists as they prepare (see Beisheim, 2020, building on the results of an expert workshop in early December 2019). The Sherpa could be a renowned scientist (e.g., from the Global Sustainable Development Report Independent Group of Scientists) or a former diplomat with a high level of expertise and standing in the field (like Ambassador Peter Thomson of Fiji for the 2017 review of SDG 14). He or she could support the process by taking up the results of the UN System's preparatory work and, on that basis, curate the development of the panel and its work by, for

example, helping to identify and brief suitable panelists. For such a proposal to succeed, Sherpas would have to be appointed sufficiently in advance.

During the HLPF, the Sherpa could serve as a well-prepared panel moderator. In the interest of the “decade of action and delivery,” the Sherpa should insist that invited panelists take note of all relevant reports to the HLPF and, based on them, discuss policy-relevant recommendations. Doing so would militate against previous practice that saw many panelists focusing instead on their own topics and interests. Moreover, the Sherpa could also help produce a “digestible” one-page note for each main panel in advance. It would help UN missions to consult with their capitals to get meaningful guidance for negotiating the Ministerial Declaration in June and prepare fit-for-purpose inputs for the HLPF’s interactive debates in July. On this basis, member states and stakeholders could also be invited to share good practices (also through UNDESA’s existing database) and make suitable commitments. The Sherpa could also work to facilitate an action-oriented follow-up *after* the HLPF.

3) Governments who prepare VNRs could first present emerging conclusions at *regional forums* where there is more time and opportunity for peer learning among countries in similar situations. Doing so would allow for more focused “how to” discussions about the tools and frameworks that facilitate progress in shared areas of concern. Given the very limited time at the HLPF in July, VNR countries should focus their presentations on sharing a “best of” their good practices that would benefit other countries and their most pressing challenges where they would benefit from external support.

Building on the VNR’s findings, other smaller innovations can maximize learning opportunities, enabling the more dedicated stakeholders to deepen, apply, and then share their knowledge. Starting in 2018, UNDESA organized *VNR labs* where participants could discuss interlinkages and country experiences in a focused way. Building on this idea, others have suggested similar events at regional meetings where countries in similar circumstances can learn directly from each other (Amanuma et al., 2019). The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has already implemented a similar idea in the form of a ‘VNR Learning Café.’ We suggest encouraging such labs to focus especially on transformative implementation measures proven to be successful and on highlighting challenges that require partners or additional resources. Then UNDESA could follow up with efforts to match states with partners, or other forums (such as the FFD or STI Forum or the Partnership or Business Forum) where there are opportunities to match supply and demand, for example with technologies, financing or investment.

Aiming at Policy Coherence

At their core, the SDGs require integrative and coherent policies that avoid siloed thinking and take interlinkages into account. More broadly, coherence requires the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policies and institutional or governance arrangements that reflect legitimate social purposes. Since the SDGs define those legitimate social purposes in the 2030 Agenda, coherence reflects calls for mutually reinforcing policies across the three dimensions of sustainable development (environmental, social and economic) and the 17 SDGs.

The 2019 *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GDSR) (Independent Group of Scientists, 2019) is potentially game-changing in providing a scientific basis on which to address synergies and trade-offs to promote a coherent transformation required to make progress on the SDGs. It

also identifies mechanisms, resources and governance arrangements at global, national and local levels to achieve transformative change. The HLPF could utilize this report to further improve coherence when carrying out the Thematic and SDG Reviews.

Member states could decide to adopt the GSDR's core logic of identifying "entry points" and "levers" for the next cycle of these reviews. Each annual HLPF could, for example, be organized around two of the six entry points laid out for the six transformative pathways that the GSDR discusses (i.e., Human well-being and capabilities; Sustainable and just economies; Food systems and nutrition patterns; Energy decarbonization and universal access; Urban and peri-urban development; Global environmental commons). SDGs that are central to the selected combination of entry points could be reviewed in-depth, while focusing on relevant interlinkages to *all* other SDGs (Beisheim 2020, see Chart 1 on page 12, building on the results of an expert workshop in early December 2019). Criteria for the combinations in each year could be: 1) distance to SDG targets (i.e., entry points with the highest distance to the associated SDG targets could be considered early in the HLPF four-year cycle); 2) alignment with relevant other international processes; 3) coverage of all three dimensions of sustainable development each year; and 4) the overarching theme should reflect relevant interlinkages.

The HLPF panels could then be tasked with discussing the four levers identified in the GSDR (i.e., governance, economy and finance, individual and collective action, and science and technology). This innovation would allow for greater coherence in the selection of themes and individual SDGs to be reviewed, following a *systems approach*, covering all SDGs and their interlinkages each year, while still mobilizing the respective communities of practice.

The latter point is essential. Past experience has shown that these SDG Reviews are important for mobilizing communities around individual SDGs *and* making these different communities to meet, exchange, and collaborate at the HLPF. Thus, we need to find ways to encourage those communities to keep coming and engaging with the HLPF. At the same time, the HLPF must preserve its value added of focusing on interlinkages and coherence more broadly, which can only come through discussing all or groups of SDGs through themes or cross-cutting issues, interlinkages and synergies.

Other existing analytical work can be drawn upon to improve coherence, including the OECD's detailed recommendations on policy coherence (OECD, 2019a). The OECD's Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development section, for example, has announced the creation of a "Global Hub on the Governance for the SDGs," in cooperation with UNDP. It has also published a report on governance as an accelerator for the SDGs, which promotes a whole-of-governance approach, with several case studies (OECD, 2019b). This is exactly the kind of tool the HLPF can promote and integrate. It can provide more guidance by disseminating or promoting these best practices more consciously. The UN could also encourage VNR countries to report on *how* these practices are working or not and to promote integration instead of only highlighting measures to implement particular SDGs. Moreover, the VNR processes could learn from OECD Peer Review processes that include consideration of a theory of change, clear methodology, and clear roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, all of which would benefit the HLPF review processes (see also Beisheim, 2015; Bernstein, 2013). Building on these lessons and insights, member states could consider using a template for the VNRs – or at least for the 700-word 'Main Messages' (with principal findings) that DESA collects until the end of April – as this would greatly help the secretariat and outside experts to better synthesize trends across reviews, identifying best practices, bottlenecks, and potential for action or need for innovative approaches, additional efforts and resources. It is hard to develop good case studies or draw out lessons and good practices with a huge amount of variation across VNRs.

Political Leadership and Guidance

Splitting the HLPF meetings and having Sherpas – as we propose – could also go a long way to enhance *political leadership and guidance*, the core mandate of the HLPF and one of two principal areas where the HLPF needs to do better according to a stakeholder survey conducted by UNDESA (the other being bringing science to bear on policy) (UNDESA, 2019c). Many valuable insights are being generated through the VNRs and Thematic and SDG Reviews. However, little is coming back down to guide countries and others when implementing the SDGs, or to mobilize resources or action items, or encourage linkages with other parts of the system. The early and more integrative reviews enabled by these changes would assist the negotiation of a more action-oriented Ministerial Declaration with recommendations to guide countries and mobilize resources. Good preparatory work would also permit more time for the ministerial segment in July to decide upon accelerated and transformative action, measures to improve coherence, and initiatives to mobilize additional resources. In terms of creating a feedback loop, it might be sensible to have a slot to report on those follow up actions at the next HLPF meeting.

The official process for the HLPF and ECOSOC review launched in February 2020. The co-facilitators want to finish the process by June 2020, but this will largely depend on how ambitious member states want to be; at the time of writing, positions are far apart. Rather than radical reform, the proposals here are in the spirit of ensuring the HLPF builds momentum to live up to its mandate. Doing so is needed to keep the support of civil society and many member states who recognize that moving beyond business-as-usual is necessary to achieve the SDGs. Such momentum is especially crucial given the 2030 Agenda and SDGs are rare exceptions to the current strains on multilateralism. An HLPF review that supports their delivery through enabling effective action by coalitions of the willing presents a key opportunity in this difficult political environment.

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