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Three suggestions for improving the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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From July 10 to July 20, 2017, all the countries of the world met at UN headquarters to take stock of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Did the 2017 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) delivered on its promises? Upon returning from New York, the IDDRI team formulates some ideas for improving the Forum, particularly in the areas of collective learning and the accountability of States. These ideas are formulated to

give the HLPF more added value relative to other international forums while emphasizing public policy impacts and the SDG's implementation process.

The 17 SDGs set forth a vision for a world without poverty or discrimination, where the environment is protected and countries cooperate with each other and help the most vulnerable. This vision may seem utopian, but it is quantifiable via indicators and detailed targets for 2030, and all member countries of the United Nations endorsed it in 2015. Yet two years after the SDGs were adopted, it is clear that this vision is far from being achieved. As pointed out by the [report of the United Nations Secretary General](#), much work remains to be done by all countries.

However, the SDGs are more than goals destined to reveal the scope of the challenge. They are also supposed to be a tool for helping countries do more and to do it better. The SDGs must therefore stimulate data collection as well as the creation of indicators as these are needed for steering public policy. In addition, they must include—and in fact already do include—SDG implementation processes at the level of each member country, which should inter alia improve coordination between ministries, foster new development plans, and promote greater participation by civil society.

As for the HLPF, it should promote learning in between countries and with civil society as well as countries' accountability—that often taboo word—to their commitments to achieving these global goals at home. The dynamic is underway, with 44 countries volunteering this year to draw up progress reports and submit them to the international community for review. Yet this process is only just beginning. For instance, the structure of discussions in plenary session needs improving if the HLPF is to become the real interactive dialogue the UN hopes for, even if all multilateral forums have long faced the same problem.^[1]

In response, three fundamental changes might be considered for the HLPF as early as 2018 or following the progress update due in 2019.

Adding value to thematic HLPF discussions

The structure of the first week of the HLPF devoted to thematic discussions needs revising. This year's discussions focused on poverty, agriculture, health, gender inequality, infrastructure, and the oceans, or SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, and 14. With so many themes under review, discussions were inevitably superficial.

Most themes were discussed before delegates who tend to be general practitioners of development, sustainable development, or the SDGs. However, as one contributor pointed out, enriching discussions of the effectiveness of public policy needs expertise. This leads directly to questioning the added value provided the HLPF compared to other thematic international institutions such as the WHO, UN Women, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), even the FAO. One possible source of added value may initially be found in focusing on the synergies—and sometimes antagonisms—between the various SDGs. For instance, reducing inequalities between men and women (SDG 5) requires improving women's access to clean water (SDG 6) as well as their right to control their body (SDG 3). It is precisely this complementarity between expertise and an integrated vision the HLPF should focus upon as it continues to explore its own role.

In fulfilling its role (and mandate) to provide political leadership, the HLPF could concentrate on emerging themes in dire need of greater political visibility. Plainly put, there is little point in discussing climate-related policies, which are already extensively covered elsewhere, and more to gain from focusing on areas such as income inequalities within countries, gender inequalities, or good governance. The HLPF could also focus on negative spillovers between countries, such as trade in products obtained through deforestation or tax havens. This is only a tentative list put forward merely to encourage others to ask what added value the HLPF contributes.

Focusing the HLPF on the impact of public policy

The second change to be implemented concerns the voluntary reports submitted by member countries and their review in the plenary session marking the opening the second week of the HLPF, when the higher-level representatives arrive, including a few (rare) prime ministers, some ministers (for the most part Environment, Development Aid, or Planning), Secretaries of State, and other high-level government representatives. These reports provide an update on SDG implementation processes within countries as well as their progress toward achieving all SDGs. They also present the public policies already in place to help meet the SDGs. Each country has 15 minutes to present its report and is then briefly questioned by other countries and civil society.

A very large number of topics are addressed simultaneously. Since a country's entire policy is supposed to be examined in just a few minutes, discussions remain superficial. Moreover, the reports along with their presentation to the assembly tend to enumerate public policies and actions taken without addressing their effectiveness. As part of the review process, countries should focus on the most critical and strategic stakes and challenges they face in simultaneously pursuing all 17 goals. In addition, they should—and this should be included in reports—focus on the effectiveness of policies by assessing past and current actions and evaluate the gap between trends and goals, pinpoint primary obstacles to action, and identify tools.

One of the main innovations of the SDGs and the HLPF as compared to the earlier United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development is the existence of a framework for goals, targets, and indicators. This should be used to the fullest extent.

Toward a HLPF that examines the SDG implementation process

The third change we see as essential concerns the SDG implementation process, which includes generating data and creating indicators, setting up a coordination framework for ministries, consultations with civil society, identification of policy gaps, budget evaluation from the perspective of the SDGs, preparation of new planning documents for the SDGs, and the alignment of existing national strategies. All of these constitute components of the ideal SDG implementation process at country level, or at least as it should be today, with member countries presenting these elements to varying degrees of succinctness in their reports and discussing them throughout the HLPF during the review phase in plenary session.

However, little is learned ultimately about what is actually in place or about the potential impact of any actions. While this may be inevitable during the initial phase, 2030 is not so far off, and discussions will soon need to focus on assessing the impact and effectiveness of SDG implementation processes, even if this consists of ex ante evaluations conducted with little benefit of hindsight. The international community urgently needs to take a critical look at this ideal process if it is to make best use of the political capital—however limited this may be—invested in the

SDGs.

Conclusion The HLPF is not the only space for collective learning and accountability regarding the SDGs, and even less so on the various topics they cover. Other spaces exist internationally, and the SDGs themselves open up new spaces for dialogue between ministries and with civil society in member countries. Yet the HLPF is the figurehead of the SDGs. As such, it must reflect and incorporate lessons learned elsewhere as well as criticism of countries' actions and their ambitions, effectiveness, and impacts. It must also identify subjects about which greater collective learning and accountability are needed while spurring work on these subjects that goes beyond the traditional thematic confines of institutions. It is from this perspective that we put forward these ideas for improving the HLPF.

Multilateral exercises designed to review policies implemented by countries are highly sensitive from the perspective of diplomacy as well as national sovereignty, as demonstrated by the difficulty involved in negotiations over the transparency of commitments made under the Paris Climate Accord. It is therefore apt that we should welcome the start of such discussions as part of the HLPF as this is vital to collective learning and to reinforcing the ambitions—individual and collective—while recognizing that there remains broad scope for further improvement. Clearly, this is a far cry from peer review exercises, such as those put in place by the OECD. One innovation that may be potentially acceptable to the HLPF would be to set up monitoring by one or two observer countries of the entire national process of drafting the voluntary country reports, with these observers then acting as formal discussants during the review phase.

Lastly, for the sustainable development community and the SDGs, the HLPF offers a space for hearing uplifting speeches about the state of the world and future solutions as well as pointed reminders of the urgency of issues such as climate change and human rights, particularly the right of women to control their body. This is a space where the community can engage in team building, a space to be heard, and a space to be empowered together in parallel to the reality of national policies—a less utopian reality than that of the SDGs.

[1] More time should be spent on exchanges between countries and with civil society. Presenters should be asked to be more precise, give concrete examples, avoid SDG “newspeak,” and be both diplomatic and challenging. Presenters should respond to what was just said rather than making tangential declarations. Finally, civil society should not to use so much of its floor time asking for... more floor time.

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