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High-Level Political Forum 2018: unsatisfying results

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On 19 July 2018, the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development ([HLPF](#)) ended. This forum, which brought together senior United Nations officials, all of the member states, local actors and NGO and private sector representatives, drew attention to numerous challenges linked to the implementation and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): hunger in the world is increasing, the water crisis is alarming, the productivity of soil is diminishing, natural disasters linked to climate change and conflicts are fostering poverty, space for civil society is shrinking, and murders of environmental activists are increasing. Despite this disturbing state of affairs, the HLPF produced little in the way of commitments or new actions. For IDDRI, this reveals a mixed picture not only of global progress towards sustainable development, but also of the HLPF as a mechanism for monitoring progress by the countries.

Thematic discussions with little added value

The HLPF is the main multilateral arena to follow-up and review progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The first part of this Forum, the technical segment, involves a thematic review of a limited number of goals. It is organised around four-year cycles; each of the 17 SDGs will therefore have been reviewed three or four times by 2030. What are the key takeaways of the 2018 edition of this thematic review?

Discussions focused on water and sanitation, access to clean energies, sustainable cities, sustainable consumption and production patterns, biodiversity, and the means of implementation, in other words SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17. A wide range of issues, which were inevitably given only brief, superficial attention. By way of example, in its [report on SDG 6 on Water and Sanitation](#), UN-Water stressed that the targets under SDG 6 will not be met by 2030 if current trends continue. Water operators, who were relatively active during the Forum, expressed concern about the superficial nature of the talks and the fact that discussing these issues for three hours every four years was not enough. Several countries (Germany, Mexico, Finland) also reiterated calls for the creation of an intergovernmental conference on water with a political mandate enabling it to make decisions and to generate collective action.

Where the other SDGs are concerned, the general level of the talks, summarising what is being discussed elsewhere (energy issues are discussed within the framework of the Paris Agreement, biodiversity issues within that of the Convention on Biological Diversity, etc.), attracted very few specialists and those that did attend expressed their disappointment that nothing new was said.

IDDDRI had [proposed](#) that talks should focus on subjects at the crossroads between different SDGs. A joint round table between biodiversity actors and those involved in the energy transition would, for example, have increased the added value of discussions. At the end of the HLPF 2018, there was growing awareness of the existence of interrelationships between the SDGs, but this will not automatically result in more coherent policies. To work on the conflicts and synergies between SDGs in a tangible manner, the HLPF has so far been unable to initiate joint work programmes between sectors, for example on dams held up by some as a renewable source of energy and by others as a cause of biodiversity loss.

A weak monitoring mechanism

The second part of the Forum, the political segment, is marked by the arrival of higher level representatives, Ministers and Secretaries of State; with just a few exceptions (Poland was represented by its Minister of Entrepreneurship and Technology), these were Ministers of Environment, Planning or Cooperation. Some 47 countries submitted to the voluntary national review exercise, presenting their state of progress on the SDGs and answering questions from other countries and civil society representatives. As it currently stands, this exercise, a key moment for accountability on SDG implementation, is relatively weak. Why? The quality of national reports varies considerably, and the questions from other countries are often prepared in advance with the country presenting its report. There has nevertheless been some improvement since last year: the countries did not present only their successes, but also the remaining challenges. But all too often, the countries still simply describe their process to “align” their existing policies, [and sometimes their budget](#), with the SDGs, without any way of verifying what the SDGs actually change, call into question, and move forward.

The SDGs certainly create a common language for shared challenges and perhaps make it possible to delve into the range of existing solutions and to draw inspiration from them. But do they give new momentum to sustainable development? Nothing is less certain. At present, there are no evaluations in this respect. To make the national

review exercise more interesting, [common standards](#) need to be produced, the new measures for 2030 Agenda implementation need to be more visible, and evaluations of the effectiveness of these measures need to be consolidated.

Good practices do exist, but need to be replicated

Although the results of the national reviews as an arena in which countries report on their progress are unsatisfactory, the production of these reviews can have an impact at the national level, in terms of the national governance of sustainable development: the mobilisation of actors, for example, or the creation of appropriate institutions. Slovakia has taken inspiration from Finland to create a parliamentary “future commission”, responsible for addressing crosscutting issues of sustainable development. Numerous countries announced the creation of interministerial coordination mechanisms or of multi-stakeholder commissions for sustainable development. According to Marie Chatardova, President of ECOSOC (United Nations Economic and Social Council, under the auspices of which the HLPF meets), the creation of such institutions will have a long-term impact on the more effective integration of sustainable development into policy making in many countries. The potential is there, but the real value of these new bodies in terms of strengthening policy coherence depends on their weight and their political mandate.

A number of countries are concerned about the specific implementation of the SDGs. Some, for example, have even calculated the cost of investment for their national implementation (Benin and Ireland). Others use the SDGs to evaluate their budget or their fiscal policy (Mexico, Colombia, Finland) (for more examples of SDG integration in budget processes, see [IDDRI's study](#)). Guatemala has launched a complex planning process to strengthen policy coherence and has defined priorities based on an analysis of the interrelationships between sustainable development issues. Spain is taking the SDGs to the highest political level and has presented a plan of action reporting on progress and proposing new measures and actions; the government says it wants to use the SDGs as a blueprint for its policies by assessing the impacts of new laws on the achievement of these goals. Germany has increased the accountability of its national SDG strategy through a peer review exercise; this exercise brings together independent international experts to question senior political and private sector officials in Germany about how they are implementing 2030 Agenda.

HLPF 2019: A need for leadership to increase collective action

One question remains: does the HLPF generate collective processes to address the above-mentioned challenges? In truth, the HLPF generates very little collective action; this was what the Austrian representative, speaking for the member states of the European Union, regretted when the ministerial declaration was adopted. At the same time, the heated discussions around this declaration and the two negative votes (United States and Israel) once again showed that the current multilateral context makes it difficult to achieve such an ambition.

The litmus test for the HLPF will come in 2019, when the Forum will be placed under the aegis of the United Nations General Assembly. Germany is already preparing for this, as is France, which has set itself the goal of finalising its national roadmap by then, which should be presented by the French President. But will this be enough? What diplomatic efforts will France—which will preside over the G7 in 2019—decide to make in order to give meaning to the HLPF 2019? And if not France, will we see other countries take the leadership of this HLPF 2019 to breathe new life into multilateralism for sustainable development?

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