

BLOG POST September 19th 2019

What to expect from the first SDG Summit?

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🕒 Reading time: 6 min



THE GLOBAL GOALS

For Sustainable Development

The United Nations (UN) High Level Political Forum (HLPF) takes place on September 24-25, 2019, under the auspices of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) for the first time since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. This special event, called the SDG Summit, will be a litmus test for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Ending a four-year review cycle of all 17 SDGs, the Summit will enable a first assessment of the progress achieved so far and the challenges ahead...and hopefully generate actions.

Are the SDGs delivering on their initial promises?

The world is not on track to achieve the SDGs. Although the extreme poverty rate continues to fall, this positive trend has slowed down. At its current rate, 6% of the world population will live in extreme poverty in 2030, missing the eradication of poverty target.¹ In the 2015-2017 period, worldwide material consumption went up from 87 billion tonnes to 92.1 billion tonnes.² Much greater efforts are needed to reach the biodiversity,³ climate,⁴ and inequality goals,⁵ in particular. As a new goal that was not discussed as such by the international community before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, SDG 10 on inequalities is not yet getting enough attention. Another concern is that some SDGs that were undergoing long-term positive trends are now experiencing setbacks. For the third consecutive year, hunger is on the rise again. New solutions are needed to respond to these worrying trends in a coherent manner, for example addressing SDG 2 on zero hunger and sustainable food systems while stopping the massive decline in biodiversity.

The 2030 Agenda promised integrated solutions, leadership by all countries and contributions from various actors. With its concrete targets and indicators, it also promised to make the abstract concept of sustainable development more operational. Including a goal on sustainable production and consumption, it promised a project of structural transformation. It is an ambitious but necessary agenda. "The credibility of the multilateral system lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda," said Maria Fernandes Espinosa Garces, President of the GA.⁶ And the UN SG in his speech at the July edition of the HLPF signalled that the SDGs are still high on the UN leader's agenda. He called the current situation and the lack of progress "upsetting", especially with regard to rising inequalities and failing climate action.⁷

Responses so far

The study *Europe's approach to implementing the SDGs: good practices and the way forward*⁸ finds that most countries in the EU region have launched new strategies, coordination mechanisms and stakeholder participation processes for SDG implementation, but that these mechanisms and processes are not always operational. The risk is that SDGs become just another bureaucratic silo. The SDGs make little sense when they are disconnected from sectorial arbitrages and budgetary debates, where they could become a tool for strategic long-term planning and a new mode of decision-making that takes into account impacts on aspects so far neglected. There are, however, interesting innovations in a number of countries (Finland, Germany, South Africa, etc.) and the growing interest of parliamentarians and Supreme Audit Institutions could increase pressure to act.⁹ But these responses are far from sufficient to fulfil the promises of the 2030 Agenda.

What about other actors? NGOs have created new coalitions that bring together actors from various sectors, opening up new ways of discussing the priorities of the country they work in.¹⁰ Cities such as Helsinki, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles and New York started to present Voluntary Local Reviews of their efforts to becoming SDG champions.¹¹ Big companies are increasingly vocal about the SDGs. Ideally, future HLPFs should follow up on these calls and commitments and assess whether they are operational and how they add up compared to requirements and contribute to SDGs that have been left behind, such as climate action, biodiversity, inequality and sustainable consumption and production patterns, including in the food system.

What will happen at the SDG Summit?

To date, there has been a lack of political leadership and guidance at the international level. The first SDG Summit under the auspices of the UNGA should change that. There is a need for SDG champions. A political declaration will

be adopted that restates the countries commitment to the SDGs and calls for voluntary actions. Although the draft declaration is not very concrete, it is a positive sign that all countries, including the US, accepted it given the heated discussions around previous political declarations in relation to the SDGs that could only be adopted via a vote; however, the fact that such a political declaration was adopted without sparks and any real controversy can also be interpreted in the current hectic context of multilateralism as a weak appropriation of the SDGs agenda.

The “leaders dialogues”, the heart of the Summit’s programme, will be an opportunity for countries to show their commitment and leadership through a representation at the highest level and the announcement of concrete commitments. Given the limited time country leaders will have in the context of such a summit and the number of topics discussed, expectations need to be tempered, though. The dialogues will focus on six topics: Megatrends impacting the achievement of the SDGs; Accelerating the achievement of the SDGs: Critical entry points; Leveraging progress across SDGs; Localising the SDGs; Partnership for sustainable development; and Defining a 2020-2030 Vision. These six topics were inspired by the UN Secretary-General’s Special Edition of the annual SDG progress report and the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR). The GSDR was prepared by 15 scientists and will be officially launched at the opening of the Summit. It will present six critical entry points for major transformations that need to be accelerated.¹²

From review to action

To date, the HLPF has functioned more as a review platform than an action platform. The SDG Summit tries to inverse this trend by inviting countries and other actors to register SDG acceleration actions. Whether countries, businesses and other actors will follow through with this intention will be a critical criterion of the success of the SDG summit. SDG acceleration actions can be registered on the SDG Summit’s website and it is rather encouraging to see that selection criteria have been put in place to value only additional efforts, by considering only actions that aim to scale up existing initiatives or introduce new ones. This might avoid the easy option of recycling existing initiatives, a logic that too often characterises public and private SDG strategies. In future, the UN could go even further in calling for initiatives for specific cross-cutting SDG challenges or targets that are particularly far from being achieved.

The first SDG Summit is a window of opportunity to provide the 2030 Agenda with the political leadership it deserves. Critical success criteria will be whether or not some leaders position themselves as SDG champions and whether the levers of progress discussed will lead to concrete commitments and open pathways for structural transformation. If the 2030 Agenda is to be the world global roadmap, it is time to move out of the soft consensus and put this agenda at the heart of our debates (especially) if they are difficult and complex. This will require a debate on sectoral policies in the light of the 2030 Agenda, including on trade.

> Read on the same subject : ["The UN Sustainable Development Goals Summit and the Climate Action Summit, New York, 23-25 September 2019"](#), an article produced by IDDRI for the European Parliament

¹ UN Secretary-General: 2019 Special edition: Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

² UN Secretary-General: 2019 Special edition: Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

³ <https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment-report-biodiversity-ecosystem-services> .

⁴ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

⁵ UN Secretary-General: 2019 Special edition: Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

⁶ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ecosoc7004.doc.htm> .

7 <http://webtv.un.org/%C3%82%C2%BB/watch/ant%C3%B3nio-guterres-un-secretary-general-opening-remarks-at-the-economic-and-social-council-high-level-segment/6059787293001/?term=?term&lan=english> .

8 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/603473/EXPO_STU%282019%29603473_EN.pdf

9 <http://www.intosai.org/about-us/sdgs-sais-and-regions.html> .

10 Hege/Demaiily (2018). NGO mobilisation around the SDGs. Iddri study.

11 <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/city-of-los-angeles-highlights-sdg-efforts-with-voluntary-local-review/>

12 <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/gsdr-co-chair-briefs-delegations-on-report-finalization-process/> .

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