

# Review of the High-Level Political Forum: towards a pivotal institution coordinating the Decade of Action and Delivery

**Elisabeth Hege, Lucien Chabason, Damien Barchiche (IDDRI)**

2020 is the year that kickstarts the "Decade of Action and Delivery" announced by the political declaration of the 2019 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Summit. Delivering on the 2030 Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development is all the more urgent in times of the current health crisis, as it provides both the direction for intervention on health systems and the framework for economic recovery plans to address the social and environmental root causes of our societies' vulnerabilities. Keeping mid-to long-term vision is critical even when we deal with a crisis. The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) should play a leading role in coordinating this Decade of Action. So far, it has mostly functioned as a forum for reviewing progress on single SDGs and at country level. But its initial mandate is much broader, so that expecting the HLPF to provide political guidance and playing an active role in creating synergies between efforts to achieve single SDGs is legitimate.

On February 10, 2020, the UN General Assembly started a process to review the format and organisational aspects of the HLPF. This review process, expected to last at least until June 2020, presents a timely window of opportunity to reposition the HLPF towards the true implementation of its mandate playing a central role in the international governance of sustainable development.

With its broad mandate and the high attendance rates often at ministerial level, the HLPF has the legitimacy to become a pivotal institution, a driving force for action and delivery at the national and the global level, setting the course, initiating dialogue and coordinating action. So far, a scarcely funded secretariat of the HLPF has been reluctant to take up such a leadership role, but an ambitious outcome of the review process and a few audacious ideas could change this. The current crisis could also trigger such necessary changes. The following analysis had been prepared before the COVID19 pandemics, but remains relevant to launch a discussion on the role of the HLPF.

## KEY MESSAGES

The presentation of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) is a centerpiece of the HLPF and the number of countries willing to submit to the exercise is encouraging. However, several improvements could be made to reinforce accountability and increase the chances that this exercise actually helps driving additional national action, such as giving a peer reviewing role to civil society experts and other countries.

Thematic and SDG reviews have been another central part of the HLPFs so far. The added value of these very general discussions with no actionable outcomes is limited. Instead, the HLPF could become the forum where intergovernmental organisations ask for dialogues on variables that lie beyond their mandate but that affect their respected area with the concerned entities. The HLPF could also take the initiative by organising such cross-sectoral dialogues around the trans-

formations identified by the Global Sustainable Development Report.

Dialogues will not be enough in the Decade of Action and Delivery. Therefore, the HLPF should also invite intergovernmental bodies to collaborate around cross-sectoral action plans in order to overcome obstacles in implementation that are due to the limited mandates of individual bodies and conventions. As an example, the HLPF is well positioned to address socio-economic issues and could invite the Convention on Biological Diversity and relevant other intergovernmental bodies to present joint multi-annual action plans, starting with two joint action plans on infrastructure and agriculture. Once these action plans adopted, the HLPF should then provide the space for following up on the progress made. Similar action plans could be launched for other off-track SDGs.

2020 is often presented as a critical year for multilateralism and a “super year” for sustainable development. UN leaders call 2020 “the year we must change course” and, most of all, the year that kickstarts the Decade of action and delivery for implementing the SDGs.

What role can the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) play in this context? It is scheduled to meet in July under the theme “Transformative pathways to realise the decade and delivery for sustainable development”. But is it up to the task to generate answers to such an ambitious theme and add value to the discussions held in climate and biodiversity negotiations fora, and elsewhere?

Given the current format of the forum, expectations are moderate. However, this super-year and the current review by the UN General Assembly on format and organisational aspects offer a window of opportunity to better position the HLPF.

## **1. THE HLPF REVIEW PROCESS: WHAT ADDED VALUE SO FAR?**

---

The decision to create the HLPF was made in 2012 at the Rio+20 Summit. When the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development came into force in 2016, it established the HLPF as its follow-up and review platform. The 2019 meeting marked the end of a four-year review cycle of all 17 SDGs culminating in the first Heads of State SDG Summit.

The General Assembly decided already in 2016 that the end of this cycle would be a timely opportunity to review the format and organisational aspects of the HLPF at its 74<sup>th</sup> session with the objective to “benefit from lessons learned in the first cycle of the forum as well as from other processes under the General Assembly and ECOSOC related to the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda” (A/RES/70/299, §21).

The process was kick-started on February 10, 2020, in conjunction with the process that aims to strengthen the Economic and Social Council (A/RES/72/305). This is an opportunity to better synchronise the ECOSOC and HLPF agendas.

In the political declaration of the SDG Summit, Heads of State pledged to carry out an “ambitious” review of the HLPF. What should we expect from an ambitious review process?

First, in order to be ambitious, the process should reposition the HLPF so that it can fully respond to its mandates and especially those that have been neglected so far. It was created to (Res 67/290. §2):

- Provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development;
- Follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments;
- Enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner at all levels;
- Have a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda;
- Ensure the consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges.

In a recent UNDESA survey, the majority of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the HLPF works well as a forum for stocktaking progress and sharing lessons, thus responding to its follow-up and review progress mandate. Although the modalities of this stocktaking and lesson sharing *via* the thematic reviews and voluntary national reviews (VNRs) can still be improved, there are other mandates on which the HLPF has much less delivered and which deserve attention. 26% of respondents of the same survey strongly or somewhat disagree that the HLPF has sufficiently discussed interlinkages. In this regard, the HLPF should focus more strongly on its mandate to enhance synergies not least because the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda is one of its main added values.

The HLPF has also underperformed on providing political guidance and recommendations and promoting an action-oriented agenda. In the UNDESA survey, 83% of respondents suggested that HLPF’s ministerial declaration should provide political guidance and recommendations for follow-up.

In this context, we present in the following section three ideas to improve the HLPF so that it can better serve these neglected mandates.

## **2. THREE IDEAS TO IMPROVE THE HLPF**

---

### **Idea 1: Increase accountability within the VNR exercise**

The political segment of the annual session of the HLPF is marked by the presence of higher level representatives, Ministers and Secretaries of State, and the presentation of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). The number of countries which did participate in this new exercise of presenting progress and answering questions asked by other countries and civil society organisations (CSOs) is in itself a success. But so far this exercise has not been entirely convincing as a key element of accountability for SDG implementation. The quality of national reports varies considerably, and the questions asked by other countries are often ones of convenience. Countries have so far mostly provided an overview of existing policies contributing to the SDGs, and rarely launched debates on policy reforms.

Only very few countries have presented a financing plan for SDG implementation. Clearly a dimension that could be improved within the VNR exercise. In the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, Member states agreed “*that cohesive nationally owned sustainable development strategies, supported by integrated national financing frameworks, will be at the heart of efforts*”. In response to the 2030 Agenda, many countries have revitalised their sustainable development strategies or plans. However, many of them lack concrete financing plans. By incorporating Integrated National Financing Frameworks as a part of their VNR, countries would be in a position to better link challenges of implementation and financing of the 2030 Agenda. All countries should be encouraged, in some cases assisted, to develop and

present financing frameworks to support their national SDGs strategies. As highlighted by the 2019 report of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Financing for Development, such country-owned financing frameworks “look at the full range of financing sources and non-financial means of implementation available to the country and set out a financing strategy to raise resources, manage risks and achieve sustainable development priorities.”

The VNRs are still a long way from peer review exercises, such as those implemented by the OECD for example within the Development Assistance Committee. The December 2019 expert group meeting for example states that there is still room for improvement for the VNR exercise to become a space of peer learning and more technical discussions. Enhancing the independence of the evaluation of progress would be an important improvement.

Furthermore, the following proposals could increase the quality of the VNR exercise:

- Entrust monitoring to one or two “observer” countries and independent civil society experts for the whole national process to draft voluntary country reports, with these observers becoming the official discussants during the review phase;<sup>1</sup>
- Enhance regional country peer reviews through Regional economic commissions such as UNECA or ECLAC;<sup>2</sup>
- UN DESA (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs) could help countries to focus on the effectiveness of policies, by assessing past and ongoing actions, assessing the gap between trends and goals, and identifying the main obstacles to action;

## Idea 2: Focus thematic discussions on how to navigate cross-SDG trade-offs and synergies

In the last four years, the technical segment of the HLPF has been mostly structured around thematic reviews and individual SDG reviews. However, as the expert group meeting stated, the HLPF has a “unique potential to draw on a wide range of sectoral inputs provided to the HLPF by various intergovernmental bodies”.<sup>3</sup> In order to use this potential, it should focus more on cross-cutting issues and on issues that cannot be discussed or resolved within sectoral conventions and specialised entities alone. In a letter to ECOSOC’s functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies, ECOSOC president Mona Juul calls for inputs to the HLPF 2020, by which intergovernmental bodies are required to outline key measures to contribute to “accelerated action and transformative pathways” for the SDGs and also identify critical gaps in “implementing the 2030 Agenda with the area of responsibility of the intergovernmental body”, “bearing in

mind interrelations with other goals and targets”. This call is an opportunity to come to the HLPF with a demand for dialogue and collaboration with the relevant intergovernmental bodies in order to fill these gaps. ECOSOC and the HLPF could play a leading role in coordinating these collaborations and the letter of the president is a step in the right direction.

Several SDGs should therefore be discussed simultaneously, focusing on the synergies and conflicts that arise in efforts to implement them and presenting best practices for integrated solutions. The risk of discussing SDGs individually is that specialists stay within the practices and approaches they have developed before the 2030 Agenda, without questioning them in the light of its overall goal of eradicating poverty while transforming economic models. Taking the 2030 Agenda seriously would mean that thematic discussions on infrastructures for example (SDG9) focus on the question of how to avoid unsustainable lock-ins and ensure new infrastructure projects are conceived within broader strategies of decarbonisation, reduction of inequalities, preservation of biodiversity and reduction of waste (four SDG trends that are particularly off-track).

Scientists who set up the *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR) warned about the dangers of a silo approach that does not do justice to the promises of an integrated and transformative agenda.<sup>4,5</sup> The GSDR defines six transformative entry points to implementing the SDGs<sup>6</sup> that present cross-cutting but concrete challenges; thematic discussions at future HLPFs could be structured around them by inviting experts from different SDG communities to discuss, from their perspective, the GSDR’s six transformative entry points.<sup>7</sup> This could lead to panel questions like: “How do we design policies that respond to the rise in global hunger while responding to the alarming trends on biodiversity loss and climate change?”

Focusing on the SDGs most lagging behind or taking into account the distance to SDG target in the choice of the issues to be discussed<sup>8</sup> could also be a way to increase the added value of the HLPF and an opportunity to come up with concrete action points (also recommended by some members of the expert group, Dec 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Similar to the idea of « twinning countries » listed in Beisheim (2020).

<sup>2</sup> De Burca, D. (2019, 8 Oct.). Where to for HLPF Review Process? *IISD SDG knowledge hub*.

<sup>3</sup> Background note for HLPF Panel on “Lessons learned from the first cycle of the HLPF and messages for 2019 HLPF Summit: What should Heads of State and Government know and how can we improve the HLPF?” (2019, 18 Jul.). UN Headquarters, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General (2019). *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*, United Nations, New York.

<sup>5</sup> Hege, E. *et al.* (2019). Initial assessment and conditions for success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. *IDDR study*.

<sup>6</sup> Placing human well-being at the heart of policies; making economies just and sustainable; transforming food systems and nutrition patterns; decarbonising energy systems and making energy universally accessible; rethinking urban and peri-urban development; and sustainably managing global environmental commons.

<sup>7</sup> See Mexico’s proposal in Beisheim, M. (2020). Reviewing the HLPF’s “format and organizational aspects” – what’s being discussed? *Assessing current proposals under debate. SWP Working paper*.

<sup>8</sup> Beisheim, M., Bernstein, S. (2020, 13 Feb.). Matching the HLPF’s Ambition to Performance: Prospects for the Review. *IISD SDG knowledge hub*.

### Idea 3: Invite and follow up on cross-sectoral action plans

The HLPF should position itself as a forum that invites different agencies and conventions to gather around joint action plans addressing interlinkages.

Growing awareness of interrelationships between SDGs has been observed, but discourses do not automatically lead to practice changes. Discussions about such interlinkages at the HLPF have remained rather theoretical. Moving to the next step, the HLPF could invite different parties to work on the conflicts and synergies between SDGs by initiating joint work programs between sectoral institutions. In order to identify these joint work programs, the HLPF should align with the wider UN sustainable development agenda (biodiversity, climate, ocean, gender, health etc.).

A first opportunity to launch such cross-sectoral action plans in 2020 is the negotiation of the new global framework for biodiversity. The Aichi Targets are part of the SDG targets expiring this year, and they have not been achieved. The CBD cannot afford to adopt a more ambitious set of targets without concrete acts of implementation. However, if these means of implementation are discussed within the convention only, it will never be able to address all the key drivers of the massive loss of biodiversity: agriculture and fishery; infrastructure and urban development; overexploitation of forests; climate change; pollutions and invasive species.

The HLPF has a much broader mandate than the CBD or any other sectoral convention. In that sense, its work and agenda could be complementary to conventions, which are by definition limited to their specific issues. Whereas sectoral conventions deal with concrete problems, the HLPF could become a place to develop solutions to address the socio-economic drivers that cause these problems, as well as the negative synergies between different SDGs (say, economic growth *versus* biodiversity). Only when the HLPF becomes a place to tackle frictions between SDGs and potential integrated solutions will it have a real added value. It should be (come) the logical framework for steering synergies between socio-economic SDGs and environmental conventions such as the CBD. These synergies could take the form of action plans developed jointly between the agencies concerned such as UN- DOALOS (Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea), UNESCO, UN Habitat, FAO, the World

Bank, UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organization), IMO and the CBD. As a test run, the HLPF 2020's ministerial declaration could invite the CBD and the FAO to develop a joint action plan on agriculture and the CBD, UNDP and the World Bank to develop a joint action plan on infrastructures to be presented at the next HLPF in 2021 in order to support the Kunming outcome in the context of the 2030 Agenda implementation and the Decade of action and delivery. Such an invitation could be formulated as follows:

*"The HLPF invites the concerned UN agencies and processes including the World Bank and WTO to prepare specific action plans together with the CBD, in order to contribute to the implementation of the post-2020 strategic framework, in the context of the overall achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Such action plans would concern agriculture, infrastructures, urbanisation, tourism, transports, forestry, fisheries, energy in their interrelation with biodiversity. The HLPF in conjunction with ECOSOC would be responsible for the setting up and processing of the agenda related to these multiannual action plans".*

Taking advantage of this year's multilateral agenda in order to kickstart such cross-cutting action plans would be a way to credibly fill with meaning the 2020's HLPFs overarching theme: "Transformative pathways to realise the decade and delivery for sustainable development".

## CONCLUSION

The 2030 Agenda has become a reference framework that cannot easily be ignored, but it suffers from a lack of champions and leadership for effective implementation. The HLPF should not develop from a "go-to" forum to a forum that over time loses popularity and credibility because of a lack of concrete outcomes. It needs to focus on encouraging transformation pathways, be it through the VNR exercise or thematic discussions.

The most concrete way to do this would be to invite inter-governmental bodies to collaborate on joint action plans. The review process under way that should include inputs from civil society is a timely opportunity to take up such ideas and bring the HLPF closer to its mandate of creating synergies, strengthening integration and adopting an action-oriented agenda.

---

Citation: Hege, E., Chabason, L., Barchiche, D. (2020). Review of the High-Level Political Forum: towards a pivotal institution coordinating the Decade of Action and Delivery. IDDRI, *Policy Brief* N°02/20.

---

This article has received financial support from the French government in the framework of the programme "Investissements d'avenir", managed by ANR (the French National Research Agency) under the reference ANR-10-LABX-14-01.

#### CONTACT

elisabeth.hege@iddri.org  
damien.barchiche@iddri.org

---

Institut du développement durable  
et des relations internationales  
41, rue du Four – 75006 Paris – France

[WWW.IDDRI.ORG](http://WWW.IDDRI.ORG)  
[@IDDRI\\_THINKTANK](https://twitter.com/IDDRI_THINKTANK)