



The HLPF 2016

First global meeting on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

by Jens Martens

The United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) met in New York from 11 to 20 July 2016. It is the central UN body addressing sustainable development, and its chief task is to monitor the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The HLPF is an intergovernmental Forum in which all 193 Member States of the United Nations can take part. In addition, representatives of major groups and civil society organizations have far-reaching options to participate. However, the Forum neither has any concrete decision-making powers nor does it perform a direct coordinating role vis-à-vis governments and UN organizations. It primarily serves the purpose of sharing information on strategies to implement the 2030 Agenda, presenting national (success) stories and critically analyzing obstacles and setbacks in achieving the SDGs.

Twenty-two countries have submitted voluntary national reviews to the HLPF 2016. Civil society groups and networks also presented initial shadow or spotlight reports at side events of the meeting. The official result of the eight-day meeting is a Ministerial Declaration consisting of five pages which, alongside some diplomatic commonplaces, mainly reiterates the agreed language of the 2030 Agenda. It does not set any new impulses.

The HLPF is still in a trial phase. Whether it can justifiably claim a central role in global sustainability policy will only be revealed over the next few years.

How the HLPF came to be

The decision to set up a new global body for sustainable development dates back to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de

Janeiro in 2012. In the Outcome Document of the Conference, the governments resolved

“(…) to establish a universal, intergovernmental, high-level political forum, building on the strengths, experiences, resources and inclusive participation modalities of the Commission on Sustainable Development, and subsequently replacing the Commission.”¹

The background was dissatisfaction with the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), founded under the umbrella of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) after the first Rio Conference in 1992. It remained weak because governments had given it neither the mandate nor the political tools required to take the necessary decisions at the interface between global economic, social and environmental policy.

In order to institutionally strengthen cooperation in this area, various reform proposals were submitted for debate in the run-up to the 2012 Rio Conference, ranging from a step-by-step strengthening of the CSD through raising its status to that of a UN Sustainable Development Council following the example of the UN Human Rights Council to the foundation of a World Council for Sustainable Development as a main organ that would have been on a par with the Security Council. However, such far-reaching initiatives had no prospect of reaching a consensus in Rio. What remained as the lowest common denominator was replacing the CSD by a High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

¹ UN Doc. A/RES/66/288, para. 84.

The governments defined the format and modus operandi of the HLPF following a tedious diplomatic negotiation process in July 2013.² The Inaugural meeting of the Forum was held in New York on 24 September 2013.³

How does the HLPF work?

Since 2014, the HLPF has met annually under the umbrella of the ECOSOC for eight days, three of them at ministerial level. The meetings are held in the context of the respective regular ECOSOC sessions in June/July.

In addition, the HLPF is to convene every four years for two days at the level of heads of state and government under the umbrella of the UN General Assembly. The first of these Summits is scheduled for September 2019.

The most important official result of the HLPF meetings is a political declaration of the ministers or heads of state and government that is submitted to the UN General Assembly.⁴

The Forum has no decision-making powers of its own. The governments have formulated its tasks in general terms as follows:

“[The HLPF] shall 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 and have a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges.”⁵

At the UN Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2015, the governments underscored the central role of the HLPF in the implementation process for the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda contains a separate chapter on the topic of “Follow-up and Review” that includes measures at global level.

“Follow-up and Review” was a particularly sensitive topic for the overwhelming majority of governments in the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda. They interpreted any form of monitoring from outside and establishing of binding accountability mechanisms as interference with internal affairs and their national sovereignty. Terms like monitoring or accountability were taboo to them. Against this background, introducing a system along the lines of the *Universal Periodic Reviews* (UPR) in the Human Rights Council (a sort of UPR for the SDGs) as suggested by civil society organizations, had no prospect of gaining approval.

All that remained in the 2030 Agenda was a list of general principles and an assessment framework with recommendations for action at national, regional and global level. The HLPF is to play a central role in overseeing a “network of follow-up and review processes for the 2030 Agenda”. The detailed modalities were defined in a separate General Assembly resolution, a draft of which had been submitted by the time of the HLPF in July 2016. The resolution was only adopted afterwards, on 29 July 2016.⁶

It stipulates that the work of the HLPF be organized on the basis of four-year cycles. Each year is under a relatively generally formulated theme, and is to review in depth the implementation of the related set of SDGs. In this manner, each Goal is to be on the agenda at least once in the course of four years. Progress made in achieving SDG 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development) is to be reviewed each year.

² Cf. UN Doc. A/RES/67/290.

³ Cf. the summary by the President of the UN General Assembly in UN Doc. A/68/588.

⁴ Cf. the Declarations 2014 (UN Doc. E/2014/L.22 - E/HLPF/2014/L.3), 2015 (UN Doc. E/2015/L.19 - E/HLPF/2015/L.2) and 2016 (UN Doc. E/2016/L.24 - E/HLPF/2016/L.2).

⁵ UN Doc. A/RES/67/290, para. 2.

⁶ Cf. UN Doc. A/70/L.60 and

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/follow-up>.

The first HLPF four-year-cycle 2016-2019

Year	Topic of the year	SDGs to be reviewed
2016	Leaving no one behind	All
2017	Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere • Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture • Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages • Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls • Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation • Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
2018	Transformation toward sustainable and resilient societies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all • Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all • Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable • Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns • Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
2019	Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all • Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all • Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries • Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts • Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

SDG Progress Report and Global Sustainable Development Report

The discussions of the HLPF are informed, *inter alia*, by an annual *SDG Progress Report* by the UN Secretary-General and a periodically issued *Global Sustainable Development Report*. The first *SDG Progress Report* was published in June 2016.⁷

On 28 pages, it provides a rough overview of the initial context for achieving the 17 SDGs. However, it is confined mainly to presenting highly aggregated global figures and remains correspondingly superficial. It sometimes arrives at dubious conclusions, for example regarding the achievement of SDG 1. Here, the Report states that the worldwide share of people living in extreme poverty, i.e. on less than US\$1.90 (in 2011 purchasing power parities),

⁷ Cf. UN Doc. E/2016/75.

dropped from 26 per cent in 2002 to 13 percent in 2012. Extrapolating the growth rates of the last 20 years, it would reach around 6 percent by 2030. In its own words, a complete elimination of extreme poverty would therefore require significantly higher growth rates – as if poverty eradication were solely a question of sufficient economic growth and had nothing to do with massive unequal distribution of income and wealth in society.

The Progress Report is supplemented by a separate statistical annex⁸ and a Global SDG Indicators Database containing detailed data disaggregated according to countries, gender, age groups, etc.⁹ Furthermore, in addition to the Progress Report the UN has published a *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2016* for the broader public in a printed and web version.¹⁰

In future, the *Global Sustainable Development Report* is to represent the academic flagship publication of the UN.¹¹ It is to appear every four years, in addition to the annual SDG reports of the UN Secretariat, and ahead of the HLPF Summit. Its purpose is

“(to) inform the high-level political forum, and shall strengthen the science-policy interface and provide a strong evidence-based instrument to support policymakers in promoting poverty eradication and sustainable development.”¹²

The governments had already decided to publish such a report at the 2012 Rio Conference, but it took them four years to agree on the modalities.¹³ In the meantime, the UN Secretariat had already produced pilot reports in 2014, 2015 and 2016, quasi as illustrative material.¹⁴ They were partly based on hundreds of so-called *Crowdsourced briefs*, i.e. short academic texts that experts from all over the world had sent to the secretariat of the Report.¹⁵ From now on, the Report is to be written by an interdisciplinary group of renowned scientists. The 15 members of the group will be appointed by the UN Secretary-General and are to commence their work by the end of 2016. The first regular Global Sustainable Development

Report is to appear in 2019. The group will be supported by a task team comprising UN personnel and co-chaired by representatives of the UN Secretariat, UNESCO, UNEP, UNDP, UNCTAD, and the World Bank.

The voluntary national reviews ...

In order to review progress made by the individual countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda and its Goals, the governments are required to submit implementation reports to the HLPF on a voluntary basis. They are referred to as *Voluntary National Reviews*, in order to avoid any impression arising that they might be binding reports. Nevertheless, guidelines do now exist for the compilation of such reports,¹⁶ and the 2030 Agenda itself formulates the expectation that the reviews are to also contain contributions by indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders.¹⁷ So despite all voluntariness, a certain degree of peer pressure is exerted on the governments to come up with such reports. Probably, hardly any government will be able to resist such pressure.

In 2016, 22 countries have already submitted voluntary national reviews to the HLPF, among them China, Mexico, France, and Germany.

22 countries that have submitted voluntary national reviews to the HLPF in 2016¹⁸

Egypt, China, Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgian, Colombia, Rep. of Korea, Madagascar, Morocco, Mexico, Montenegro, Norway, Philippines, Samoa, Switzerland, Sierra Leone, Togo, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela

The reports differ considerably in terms of size, quality, and thematic depth, as well as the degree of civil society participation in their compilation and presentation in New York. Six months after the SDGs having entered into force, the reports can of course say little about progress in their implementation. But they do demonstrate the political willingness of governments to take the Goals seriously and systematically consider the 2030 Agenda in all policy areas. At the same time, the reports are self-portrayals of the governments. One hardly finds self-criticism and admissions of weaknesses or lack of action in them. At least the German report, for

⁸ Cf. <http://unstatp.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2016/secretary-general-sdg-report-2016--Statistical-Annex.pdf>.

⁹ Cf. <http://unstatp.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>.

¹⁰ Cf. <http://unstatp.un.org/sdgs/report/2016/>.

¹¹ Cf. here <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsdreport>.

¹² UN Doc. E/2016/L.24 – E/HLPF/2016/L.2, Annex, para. 2.

¹³ The modalities of the Global Sustainable Development Report are attached as an Annex of the HLPF 2016 Ministerial Declaration (UN Doc. E/2016/L.24 – E/HLPF/2016/L.2).

¹⁴ Cf. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsdreport>.

¹⁵ Cf.

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/science/crowdsourcedbriefs>.

¹⁶ Cf.

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9768/Guidelines%20from%20SG%20report.pdf>.

¹⁷ Cf. UN Doc. A/RES/70/1, para. 79.

¹⁸ The reports can be accessed at

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/inputs>.

instance, highlights the continuing considerable need for action, stating that:

“However, it [Germany] also still has a lot to do in order to achieve the SDGs. Implementing the Agenda means bringing about a **comprehensive transformation in all areas of life**. And for this, a new culture of sustainability is needed.”¹⁹

All in all, the government reports create the impression that each of the countries is on the right course towards achieving the SDGs. The report submitted by Turkey, for instance, shows that their rhetoric does not necessarily tally with reality in society. Given the alleged human rights violations and repression of freedom of expression there, it sounds almost cynical for the Turkish report to state that:

“The main objective is to constitute a social structure that respects all religious beliefs and life styles as a fundamental principle that is convenient for individuals and different segments of society to express themselves freely through a pluralist perspective of liberal democracy. Fundamental rights and freedoms are to be continuously enhanced in the light of the universal criteria and practices. Within the framework of pluralist and participatory democratic political processes, strengthening mechanisms to get opinions and preserving the viewpoints of different social groups and NGOs are two of the main objectives.”²⁰

... and their civil society pendants

In the light of such whitewashing, the independent reports issued by civil society organizations seem all the more important. They tend to give gritty portrayals of the situation in the individual countries, point to obstacles to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, and formulate political conclusions addressing the governments. A few dozen of these Shadow and Spotlight Reports have already been compiled for the HLPF 2016, including in Mexico, Kenya, and Finland.²¹ Like the government reports, they differ considerably in terms of volume, quality and thematic foci.

¹⁹ Federal Government of Germany (2016): Report of the German Federal Government to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2016. Berlin, p. 4. (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10686HLPF-Bericht_final_EN.pdf).

²⁰ Cf. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/107102030%20Agenda%20Turkey%20Report.pdf>, p. 23.

²¹ A number of civil society reports can be found at <https://www.2030spotlight.org/en/national-civil-society-reports>.

The most comprehensive report has been compiled by a civil society alliance of around 20 environmental, development and human rights organizations and trade unions and published under the title “Spotlight on Sustainable Development 2016”.²² The report above all addresses the structural obstacles and political incoherence in the process of achieving the SDGs at international level.

The most detailed national report has been presented by civil society organizations from the Philippines,²³ the Czech Republic,²⁴ and Germany²⁵ in the run-up to the HLPF. In the German report under the title “Deutschland und die UN-Nachhaltigkeitsagenda 2016 – Noch lange nicht nachhaltig” (Germany and the UN Sustainability Agenda 2016 – far from sustainable), 40 authors examine the context for the implementation of the SDGs in and by Germany and draw conclusions for politics, the private sector, and civil society. That the HLPF offers an occasion to form new cross-sector alliances of civil society groups and networks in many countries in order to jointly develop analyses and recommendations for action to realize the 2030 Agenda is one of the Forum’s most important (side) effects.

What comes next?

As yet, the HLPF is still in a trial phase. The governments only took final decisions on the precise modalities of the *Follow-up and Review* after the meeting on 29 July 2016.²⁶

Discussions at UN level over the next few months are above all going to focus on how the UN Organizations themselves can be made fit for purpose in terms of implementing the 2030 Agenda. An *Independent Team of Advisors (ITA)* headed by Klaus Töpfer and Juan Somavia has submitted proposals addressing this.²⁷ Decisions on the issue are to be taken by the end of the year in the framework of the so-called *Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR)*.²⁸

It is not yet known which countries will be presenting their progress reports at the HLPF next year.

²² Cf. <https://www.2030spotlight.org>.

²³ Cf. <http://www.socialwatch.org/varios/SWP-Spotlight-2016-ph30agenda.pdf>.

²⁴ Cf.

http://www.socialwatch.org/sites/default/files/Social%20Watch%20zpra-va%202016.qxp_web.pdf.

²⁵ Cf. www.2030report.de.

²⁶ Cf. UN Doc. A/70/L.60.

²⁷ Cf.

<https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/qcpr/ita-findings-and-conclusions-16-jun-2016.pdf>.

²⁸ Cf. <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/content/what-quadrennial-comprehensive-policy-review-qcpr>.

The German Government has announced that it will only be submitting the next voluntary national review to the HLPF in 2021. From a civil society angle, such a five-year cycle is not sufficient. Civil society organizations therefore plan to already compile national and international Spotlight Reports in 2017 again. Germany's G 20 presidency, with the summit in Hamburg on 7-8 July 2017, offers an additional occasion to put the viability of G20 members' policies to the test regarding the 2030 Agenda. The next meeting of the HLPF is to be held immediately afterwards, from 10 to 19 July 2017.

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Further information

[High-Level Political Forum](#)

[The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2016](#)

[Statistical Annex](#)

[Global SDG Indicators Database](#)

[Global Policy Watch](#)

[Spotlight on Sustainable Development 2016](#)

[Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

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