



The HLPF review has to match the ambition of the 2030 Agenda

This discussion paper features content extracted from a chapter in the 2019 Spotlight Report titled, “Democratic global governance: if it doesn’t challenge power it isn’t democratic,” by Barbara Adams, Global Policy Forum. The 2019 Spotlight Report is available for download at <https://www.2030spotlight.org>.

The High-level Political Forum (HLPF) for monitoring the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development was mandated by the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012, and the details were negotiated by Member States in 2013. Proposals for a robust accountability body were resisted and the result was a forum/talk shop, removing an accountability voice in favour of follow-up and review.

Its founding resolution (A/RES/67/290) also mandated a review process, which will be formally initiated in September 2019 and conducted during the 74th session of the UN General Assembly. The response to the 2030 Agenda and assessment of its progress has been concentrated on the HLPF almost exclusively, which as currently configured is patently inadequate for the task.

Due to the high interest from the Member States, civil society, academia and the private sector, the already limited timeframe of the HLPF becomes overloaded by bite-size snapshots.

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have also captured the attention of many parts of the UN system, which are slowly restructuring their work plans towards their achievement. This fact can be seen in negotiations on UN development system (UNDS) reform and country-level reporting; on the push for a Data Revolution as well as Information and Technology. The VNRs are being analysed by civil society groups as well as the UN Committee on Development Policy to see the extent to which they are focused on leaving no one behind, and tackling the furthest behind first, as well as the extent to which they address trade-offs between the goals and especially spillover effects from global policies that impede their achievement.

A number of countries have reported on adapting or adjusting their national plans and to some extent budgets to reflect achieving the SDGs.

The HLPF review 2019-2020

All these developments place even more pressure on the HLPF review process, which will be ‘launched’ at the SDG Summit in September 2019, to break out of its **time management, coordination and working methods mindset** to pioneer a new generation of governance. Such a breakthrough is essential for it to catch-up with the new generation of global economic practice that has been established over the last few decades.

The review process is a barometer of the potential of the broader UN reform process, the focus on which is gaining momentum to replace a perfunctory 75 year anniversary at the UN commemoration ceremony in 2020.

Can the HLPF review lead the way to a new generation of global governance or will it be relegated to minimalist and lowest common denominator outcomes, sometimes guaranteed by big power politics, going it alone when convenient and insisting on consensus when it suits their interests?

Shifting tides: can the HLPF capture the momentum or it is in over its head?

While honouring the Rio+20 agreement that it would be universal and high-level, the HLPF started its life lacking an official identity and with fewer working days and a smaller UN budget allocation than the Commission on Sustainable Development, the body it replaced.

This was clearly an attempt by a few States to minimize and ‘invisibilize’ the 2030 Agenda, particularly with regard to monitoring and accountability of the HLPF.

Even so, the HLPF has become the go-to forum for the last four years. It has a global constituency among Member States, UN agencies, civil society and the private sector. Member States have taken ownership of the SDGs and many have integrated them into their national planning and budgets. The up-take among countries has begun to break the mold of the programme country / donor relationship that prevails elsewhere in the UN system.

So many countries have volunteered to report on their progress through the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the annual HLPF session (some for the second and even third time) that the session is staggering under the weight of not enough time – and not enough substance, too much talk and not enough (inter)action.

With one third of the SDG implementation period to 2030 already over, 2019 is the time for serious ‘lessons learned’ from this first phase. The final decade must build on the evident and abundant interest to inject urgency, action and accountability.

Addressing the governance challenge

The next phase of implementation should bring the HLPF away from the ECOSOC orbit and the scramble of UN agencies to stake a claim to specific goals. The SDG Summit in September 2019 and the

HLPF review process that will take place in 2019-2020 are opportunities to reposition the HLPF and the 2030 Agenda more firmly in the General Assembly machinery, similar to the direction taken by Member States for the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) in 2005. With an agenda of equal importance and intimately connected to those of the HRC and PBC, the General Assembly should establish a third such body, a Sustainable Development Council, supported with complementary machinery at regional and thematic levels. Furthermore it should convene, on a regular basis, inter-council/commission meetings. As part of broader UN reform efforts these councils could refresh (and replace) much of the work of the General Assembly Second and Third Committees, which includes economic and social development, gender equality and human rights.

While the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have propelled the drive to break out of the existing siloes of thinking and programming, this has not been matched at the governance level, with a disproportionate focus on a single body, the HLPF. The HLPF as currently configured is only a global forum and the review process threatens to go no further than **tinkering with working methods**. The need for integration, prevention and addressing root causes in policy-making demands a new role for the UN General Assembly, that of adjudicator across policies, across sectors and across institutions. **The SDGs, collectively and by design, embody cross-cutting, cross-border and intersecting policy demands.**

The growing tensions between trade and investment regimes and human rights obligations, between tax avoidance and illicit financial flows and the vital role of public finance throw into sharp relief massive governance failures at the national and global levels. Trade-offs between policies and across borders cannot continue to be ignored. The UN's highest political body needs to exert leadership and position itself as the cross-cutting governance space.

The UN General Assembly would also benefit from reconfigured Member State representation (the prerogative of each Member State to decide) to close the gap between global presence and country priorities and plans. Representatives in global arenas and delegates to intergovernmental processes should be drawn not only from the executive branch but also from the legislature and sub-national bodies. **This is essential to put the brakes on the trend towards replacing democratically accountable country representation with 'stakeholders' – legislation and regulation with 'partnerships'**. Such representation will also contribute to transparency and coherence across line ministries and enhance country ownership.

Upgrading – and re-constituting - the SDG Summit

In establishing the HLPF, the Rio+20 conference mandated that it be held at Summit level every four years. In 2019 this will take place in September in conjunction with the annual UN General Assembly high-level debate. This is inadequate to the task; rather, it should follow the pattern of other UN major bodies that convene for a two to three-day conference every four or five years (such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), or the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty), not a day

tagged on in September for speeches. Furthermore, Summit leadership should be charged not to reflect and put a stamp on earlier meetings and declarations, but to drive the agendas forward, flag major concerns and emerging issues, and kick-start related action plans.

The first phase of SDG monitoring has concentrated on **quantity** – of countries reporting, on processes and institutions and constituencies hitching their flags and futures to the 2030 Agenda. The second phase must show **quality** as well as seriousness in addressing the obstacles to achieving the SDGs. It must break the 'domestication only' approach currently dominating the reporting in the VNRs and address the trade-offs across goals and spill-over effects across borders. Many goals cannot be achieved in country isolation, but are dependent on international cooperation. There are enormous differences among countries and governments in their policy space to influence and shape global regimes and rules. A new reporting framework needs to be developed to measure the power imbalances and be an obligatory chapter in VNR reporting.

For the HLPF, as for other UN governance forums, Member States face the challenge of shifting gears from tinkering to transformative change.

The 2030 Agenda – an accountability challenge

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda has pried open the lid on many stubbornly resistant dynamics and approaches prevalent in the UN system and its inter-governmental processes. It has been a major driver for reform efforts and spurred attention to strengthening the science-policy interface and deepening capacity for data collection and analysis.

The 2030 Agenda has been in many ways a game changer. Its universal application requires all countries to report on their progress in achieving the SDGs, not only programme countries or development assistance recipients. It has also driven long-overdue UN development system reform and given impetus to the need to address root causes in the pursuit of sustainable development and sustainable peace. UN human rights experts have offered high-quality analyses and recommendations to reach the vision for 2030. The human rights machinery demonstrates a comprehensive set of quality standards, from poverty elimination to housing, water and sanitation to debt and trade agreements. These are available to all Member States and their residents, although they are severely underutilized.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have maintained the commitment many demonstrated during the drafting of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into the tasks of monitoring and contributing to their implementation. Throughout, they have shown an impressive range of self-organizing and diverse ways of working from community to global level, often demonstrating a unique blend of experience and expertise. Their autonomy is recognized by the rights of participation spelled out in the HLPF resolution (A/RES/67/290), which set the minimum standard for the UN as a whole including the General Assembly.

The challenge of the 2030 Agenda has been taken up across the UN expert bodies including the Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA). Addressing the need for effective, accountable and inclusive institutions (E/RES/2018/12), CEPA elaborated a set of governance principles on each of these which were adopted by Member States in 2018.

It has also been taken up by many of the UN human rights experts and rapporteurs. In an unusual joint letter to the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) addressing Working Group III (Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) Reform) in April 2019, seven human rights experts addressed the urgency to “remedy the power imbalance between investors and States” calling for systemic reform in their submission to consideration of the architecture of the ISDS system (OL ARM 1/2019).¹ Their letter addressed many aspects that go to the heart of the governance responsibilities of states and their ability and willingness to meet their commitments in the 2030 Agenda.

The signatories pointed out the contradictions and incoherence between human rights law and the rule of law, contradictions of particular concern for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, which reaffirm the importance of “an enabling international economic environment, including coherent and mutually supporting world trade, monetary and financial systems, and strengthened and enhanced global economic governance”. There is a critical need to fundamentally reform international investment agreements, “so that they foster international investments that effectively contribute to the realization of all human rights and the SDGs, rather than hindering their achievement.” The ISDS also address the limitations on policy space, fiscal space and reality of regulatory chill that illuminate the multiple barriers faced by public servants and public sector advocates at all levels of government.

Implementation gaps – accountability failures

The SDG implementation phase since 2016 has certainly spun off many initiatives, studies, meetings and reports. At the HLPF alone there have been a total of 158 VNRs over four years. The UN’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) administers a platform for partnerships that currently hosts 4,361 “partnerships/commitments” and there are frequent business and investor events co-organized or facilitated by UN agencies and programmes.² The international financial institutions (IFIs) and multilateral development banks have all called for moving from billions to trillions.

While the UN ‘family’ has embraced the profile of the SDGs and is campaigning to increase awareness of them at all levels, there is concern that much has been characterized by cherry picking, self-

¹ Letter transmitted to all Members of the Working Group III and a copy of it to the secretariat of the UNCITRAL, REFERENCE: OL ARM 1/2019 , 7 March 2019, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Development/IEDebt/OL_ARM_07.03.19_1.2019.pdf.

² The “Partnerships for SDGs online platform”: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships/>

promotion and self-positioning, apparent in abundance from all players – governments, UN agencies, corporations and CSOs alike. All players are understandably presenting themselves as committed to and vital for the achievement of the SDGs. But presence, persuasion and numbers are still the limited and inadequate currency for measuring impact.

The remaining decade to 2030 needs to build in cycles of quality and independent oversight, and robust accountability. This will require a dramatic shift from the win-win, pay-to-play dynamic prevalent around the UN.

A first step would be to incorporate benchmarks, not only indicators but also actions, to delineate SDG-washing by governments and corporations that highlight best practices while hiding domestic and extraterritorial impacts such as emissions and pollution, lack of labour standards and so on. To overcome piecemeal and inadequate responses and support genuinely transformative actions, not only is a change of mindset essential, but also a change of financing strategies, of measurement, of incentives and of reporting and monitoring by public institutions, including the UN. These must highlight obstacles to achieving the SDGs with the same attention as actions to advance them.

The **HLPF** as currently set up and practicing cannot do this. It **is a platform that welcomes all and challenges none.**

Social Watch

Avda. 18 de Julio 2095/301
Montevideo 11200, Uruguay
socwatch@socialwatch.org
www.socialwatch.org

Global Policy Watch

205 E 42nd St | 20th Fl
New York, NY 10017, USA
globalpolicywatch.org

Global Policy Forum

Koenigstrasse 37a
53115 Bonn, Germany
gpf@globalpolicy.org
www.globalpolicy.org