



People's Assembly Debates UN Reform and HLPF Review

By Elena Marmo

Last week, the UN General Assembly 74th Session's first full week in New York City met amid High-level meetings on climate, health, the SDGs, financing for development, and Small Island Developing States. Over 90 Heads of State or Government convened at UN Headquarters for this political moment, described by the outgoing President of the General Assembly, María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés as “inextricably linked strands of DNA that make up our ‘blueprint’ for the world”.

Integral to this year's session has been the heightened participation of corporate, philanthropic and financial actors in both the official, High-level meetings themselves and a variety of concurrent meetings including the SDG Business Forum, the World Economic Forum's Sustainable Development Impact Summit, UN Global Compact events, the Bloomberg Global Business Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Goalkeepers event.

On 24-25 September, parallel to these High-level UN meetings and closed-door or invitation only business meetings, civil society organisations convened at the Church Center just across the street, not having been awarded meeting space in the UN premises. From here, overlooking the various security checkpoints and motorcades pulling into the United Nations, members of civil society engaged in critical discussions on the future of sustainable development and reforms needed to ensure a just and equitable future for all.

The People's Assembly, organised by the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), hosted a session on “High level political forum (HLPF) Reform Including the Role of Private Sector in the UN”. The conversation, moderated by Jens Martens of Global Policy Forum, featured panelists Oli Henman of Action 4 Sustainable Development (A4SD), John Romano of the Transparency, Accountability, Participation (TAP) Network, Kate Donald of the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) and Barbara Adams of the Global Policy Forum. Their remarks and the subsequent interactive conversation touched on challenges and opportunities ahead regarding reform to the wider UN, proposals to reconstitute the HLPF, and immediate opportunities to reform the HLPF.

Big-picture thinking

Wider UN system reform concerns and core principles such as participation and multilateralism were at the forefront of the discussion. Kate Donald of CESR raised the challenge of holding actors outside the UN, like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to account, while Barbara Adams of GPF identified the trend of “multi-stakeholderism” and its potential for crowding out the public sector as also requiring accountability. These concerns hold implications not only for the SDGs and 2030 Agenda, but more broadly for the future of global governance and multilateralism.

Donald discussed the IMF’s largely unaccountable role in influencing both SDG implementation and wider UN norms and policies. She noted that the IMF has been “positioning itself as an actor on the SDGs and exercises a lot of financial, intellectual, ideological power over how countries implement the SDGs”. And in the cases of Egypt and Brazil, which she discusses in her [2019 Spotlight Report chapter](#) with colleague Grazielle David, the countries saw adverse effects for SDGs when implementing IMF-supported (or sanctioned) austerity measures and public spending freezes. She points out that the IMF therefore “has influence on fiscal and policy space outside of the UN” and in turn has implications for not only achievement of the SDGs but the authority and relevance of global governance as well.

Adams highlighted concerns regarding the UN system-wide trend toward “multi-stakeholderism”, recognising that while it may create room for civil society participation, along with it comes an increased role for the unaccountable private sector and a crowding out of the fundamental role of the public sector in governance. Donald points out a critical distinction, saying multi-stakeholderism is different than participation” and that the “problem with multi-stakeholderism is it obscures power dynamics”. Adams notes that the “challenges we are facing won’t be solved with win-win approaches, there are conflicts of interests” and “solutions that don’t tackle power asymmetries aren’t going to do it”. This point is particularly resonant in her recent 2019 Spotlight Report contribution, [“Democratic global governance: if it doesn’t challenge power it isn’t democratic”](#).

It is through this enhanced multi-stakeholderism that the UN is promoting what is now called [“shared value partnerships”](#) and effectively reducing the responsibility and role of governments and the public sector while also stalling the much-needed systemic changes in the realms of wealth distribution, corporate and elite accountability, and old models of economic development. Adams elaborated on this idea, stating, “We are not going to be protecting and advancing human rights and stopping ecological destruction through shared-value partnerships if we allow the UN to become just another stakeholder.”

With panelists and participants raising questions around the 75th Anniversary of the UN, the session encouraged all to think about their vision of the UN and their corresponding theories of change. In what ways can the 75th Anniversary be the start of a conversation on the future of the United Nations and an opportunity to begin a more robust reform process, rather than a simple tinkering of methods and process?

An HLPF Reconstituted

The panelists and participants also raised questions and suggestions on means to reconstitute the HLPF, focusing on a medium-term approach with questions on the role the HLPF and SDGs play in the broader UN. The same bigger-picture concerns raised around outside actors and multi-stakeholderism also apply here—reform to the HLPF can have wider reverberations across the UN System.

A key challenge to the HLPF's effectiveness is its heritage and purpose. As participants highlighted, the HLPF was established to be a forum rather than an intergovernmental body. Romano of TAP Network said that as "it's not a decision-making body, how do we maybe upgrade" the HLPF? Henman of A4SD describes the HLPF as "lacking real teeth and doesn't inspire action on behalf of government".

In this context, Barbara Adams of GPF suggests a serious restructuring of the HLPF, advocating it be brought under the General Assembly and given a status similar to the Human Rights Council so that it has the capacity to set norms and overcome governance weakness at a global level.

On the topic of reconstituting the HLPF, there exists an opportunity to leverage the human rights system—both in terms of learning and of coordinating. Kate Donald of CESR notes calls to give "the human rights system more credence, more teeth, and strength within the SDGs accountability sphere". Perhaps what she called the 'accountability by design' of the human rights system can lend itself to the accountability gap the HLPF is facing.

The panelists and participants also raised the lack of coherence feeding the accountability gap and impeding the 2030 Agenda from realisation its full potential. After the panelists' remarks, participants likened the challenges of coherence to "taping a new crown jewel on the old crown...inviting more and more people to an old framework". Because of the universality of the 2030 Agenda, actors across the UN System and beyond can certainly make links to their work and support implementation. And as the Secretary-General and UN Leadership continuously position the SDGs as the guiding force and preventive tool for global safety and prosperity, the more the HLPF seems entirely inadequate for the task.

Kate Donald of CESR notes the "SDGs are everywhere and nowhere" which results in a "fundamental lack of coherence". Because as Donald says, there is a "lack of accountability around who is talking about them and isn't," the SDGs become talking points and ambitious goals to "get behind" without any accountability regarding implementation and follow-through. This "SDG-washing" can be seen by actors such as the World Bank, IMF and major companies outside of the UN as well as across the UN System. Most recently, UN entity executive boards met in September to discuss the implementation of A/RES/72/279 to [reposition the United Nations to serve the 2030 Agenda](#) and each of them highlighted their successes on SDG progress.

HLPF Immediate

As part of the HLPF mandate, every four years the forum must carry out a “follow-up and review” process to assess progress and effectiveness of the HLPF and make necessary changes. The same bigger-picture concerns were raised around outside actors, multi-stakeholderism and progress of the 2030 Agenda. John Romano of the TAP Network notes, “HLPF reform is the beginning of the conversation” and presents an opportunity to “bring colleagues from national and local level” to make immediate changes. Hence, he focused on reform to the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process, along with panelist Oli Henman of A4SD. Henman describes the VNR process as an opportunity for governments, featuring a “showing of tourism videos, a pick and mix of SDGs they want to report on.”

Henman and Romano discussed various proposals to lengthen the VNR portion of the HLPF to address the problem that “accountability and real change are still not happening” as noted by Henman. Romano highlighted the need to address the role national and local civil society can play in holding governments accountable to the SDGs and VNRs they’ve committed to. Participants reiterated this need for accountability of Member States and suggested incentives like access to special appointments within the UN and disincentives like real-time fact checkers, rating the authenticity of statements made in session.

Romano also raised the relevance of the Regional SDG Fora as “more honest and in-depth”. An immediate action could very well include increased participation and investment in these fora, which also presents an opportunity for local and grassroots civil society to participate in a setting with a lower barrier to entry. And perhaps the goal-by-goal thematic review portion of the HLPF might be scrapped altogether, which Kate Donald of CESR supported. With proposals to divide the HLPF into two or more distinct sessions, she pointed out that this could prevent colleagues and Member States with limited means from participating to the fullest.

Conclusion

While this prospect of reform to the HLPF in the short and long term amid broader reform to the UN System can appear daunting and discouraging, the current political moment—the HLPF review, the 75th Anniversary, and growing discontent in the status quo among civil society—presents a real opportunity to shape the international development architecture and create a fairer, more equitable world where human rights and sustainable development can be realised.

From immediate changes to the VNR process, enhanced accountability action and regional participation to a medium-term reconstituting of the HLPF and a long-term shaping of the United Nations, the People’s Assembly served as a space to convene and discuss the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

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