UN reforms for the 2030 agenda: are the HLPF's working methods and practices "fit for purpose"?
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Are the HLPF's Working Methods and Practices "Fit for Purpose"?

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has initiated various reform processes to effectively implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Member states have already agreed to reorganise the United Nations (UN) development system. While further in-depth reforms are necessary, they would be difficult to realise in the current political context. Improvements to working methods and practices, however, are within the realm of the possible.

This study starts by examining what working methods and practices helped member states consensually adopt the ambitious 2030 Agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in it, in September 2015. The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is currently the heart of the UN's sustainable development governance. It is meant to support member states in taking on political leadership and responsibility for implementing the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. An analysis will show, however, that the HLPF risks failing in its task: the complexity of the 2030 Agenda, the HLPF's broad mandate, the large number of participants, and their high expectations are creating problems for a forum that — having been founded in 2013 — is not sufficiently equipped for this.

In 2016 member states already decided to review the format and organisational aspects of the HLPF in 2019—2020. Drawing on an analysis of the HLPF's current working methods and practices, this study explores ideas for improvements.
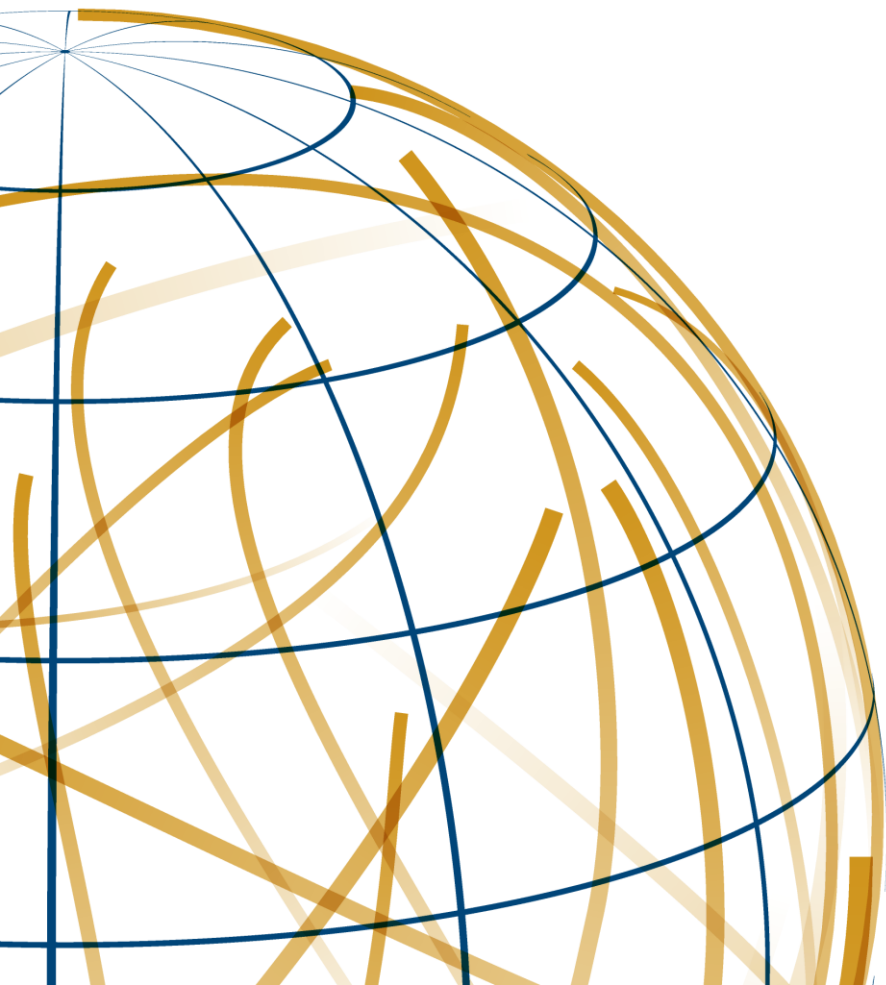
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Multilateralism and the United Nations (UN) have both been under pressure — and not just since the new US administration took office. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has initiated various reforms to make the UN "fit" for its goals and mandates. Among other things, these reforms should enable the UN to effectively implement the *Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development*.

In September 2015, the UN member states consensually adopted the ambitious 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in it. Many factors contributed to that success. This study examines the extent to which certain *working methods and practices* proved productive. For example, the UN working group that developed the SDGs had a composition that cut across the usual UN negotiating groups. This proved helpful in breaking through habitual North-South conflict patterns. Very productive cooperation with non-state actors was also an important prerequisite for the positive results. This study therefore starts with a retrospective: what lessons can be learned from the working methods and practices used in the negotiations on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda?

The *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development* (HLPF) is currently at the heart of the UN's sustainable development architecture. In July 2018, it met for the third time since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda — so now is a good time for an interim assessment of the working methods and practices that have become established in this forum. According to the founding idea, the HLPF is to play a "central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes of the 2030 Agenda at the global level" for the implementation of SDGs. Up until now, however, the annual HLPF *Thematic Reviews* and *SDG Reviews* have barely been suitable for a systematic review, lacking visible preparation, substantial debate and relevant follow-up. The *Voluntary National Reviews* (VNRs) presented at the HLPF are considered a success. Since 2016, more than half of the UN's member states have reported to the HLPF on how they implement the SDGs. However, the quality of the reports and under-

lying review processes must be improved. The consequences of the reporting are also unclear. This raises the question of the reviews' relevance.

Based on an analysis of previous experiences with these and other HLPF elements, this study discusses possible options for reforms. These are necessary because the HLPF threatens to become the victim of its own popularity. The high demands placed on the 2030 Agenda, its complexity, and the large number of participants at the HLPF with their high expectations also create problems for a forum that is not equipped for this. In 2018, many of the participants — who are better prepared from year to year — were disappointed by the lack of results. The Forum can only generate real added value if good preparatory processes ensure that member states discuss relevant findings at meetings, and then translate them into productive policy decisions.

The UN *reforms* currently being negotiated in New York, especially those of the UN development system and the Economic and Social Council, offer an opportunity to bring about improvements in the HLPF as well. After all, it is the declared aim of these reforms to optimally support member states in their transformation efforts and to orientate relevant UN processes more transparently, more precisely, more consistently, and with a higher degree of integration towards the goals of the 2030 Agenda. In order to maintain the positive momentum generated by the 2030 Agenda, the German government, together with other interested member states, should support a preparatory process for the HLPF Review planned for the 74th session of the General Assembly (2019/20).

Introduction

Success at a Difficult Time for Multilateralism

In September 2015, the heads of state and government of all UN member states adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.[1] According to its title and preamble, the 2030 Agenda aims at nothing less than "Transforming Our World". The agenda has four parts: a declaration, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a section each on the means of implementation and on the follow-up and review of the SDG implementation.

The SDGs are the successors to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were meant to have been attained by 2015. The so-called "Post-2015 Debate" started in 2011. The SDGs also come out of the tradition of the Rio Process, which produced the Climate Change and Biodiversity Conventions, Agenda 21, and other important agreements in 1992. In the run-up to the Rio+20 Conference, it was Colombia (later joined by Guatemala and Peru) that encouraged the development of SDGs.[2] During the Rio+20 conference in 2012, however, member states were unable to specify any goals — merely agreeing on 26 (!) thematic areas to be covered by the SDGs.[3] In September 2013 the General Assembly decided to amalgamate the debates on the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs and to negotiate *one* list of goals. In the Rio+20 Outcome Document, member states recommended setting up an open working group to submit a proposal for a series of SDGs to the General Assembly.[4] In 2014, after intensive consultations and discussions within the working group, participating member states agreed on the 17 SDGs with their 169 targets, which were confirmed in the subsequent intergovernmental negotiations and adopted by the General Assembly in September 2015.

The SDGs contain all areas already covered by the MDGs, including eradicating poverty and hunger, promoting health and education, gender equality, and the universal provision of water and sanitation. Beyond that, a number of new goals have been added: affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, developing infrastructure and support for innovation, sustainable cities and communities, and reducing inequality. Environmental protection aspects are also consistently integrated above and beyond the goals directly geared to ecological aspects (protection of the climate, life below water and on land). A goal for promoting peace and strengthening governance has also been included, which was highly controversial until the very end: SDG 16 refers to supporting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Another novelty is that means of implementation were negotiated both within all SDGs and as a separate goal (SDG 17).

> **It is no longer about development policy alone, but about political change in *all* policy areas and countries.**

The 2030 Agenda reflects (or so it declares, at least) an international *minimum consensus* on how UN mem-

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1 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/70/1) (New York: UN, October 2015).

2 Paula Caballero, *A Short History of the SDGs*, 20 September 2016, https://impakter.com/short-history-sdgs/ (accessed 14 June 2018). Felix Dodds, Jorge Laguna-Celis and Liz Thompson, *From Rio+20 to a New Development Agenda. Building for a Sustainable Future* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2014); Birgit Lode, "SDGs. A Renewed Commitment to Implement Existing and Emerging Sustainable Development Goals?", in *UNCSD Rio 2012. Twenty Years of Sustainability Policies — Now Put into Practice?*, ed. Marianne Beisheim and Susanne Dröge, SWP Research Paper 8/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2012), 31—40.

3 Farrukh Khan, *The SDG Story. An Insider Account of How It All Came About*, 13 December 2016, https://impakter.com/sdg-story-insider-account-came/ (accessed 14 June 2018).

4 UNGA, *The Future We Want* (A/RES/66/288) (New York: UN, 11 September 2012).

ber states want to shape the future. The agenda's title "Transforming Our World" makes it clear that this is no longer just about development policy, but about political change in *all* policy areas and countries. Transformation means that *structural* obstacles to development — such as violent conflicts, corruption, inequality, and inhumane work — shall be more explicitly addressed. The same applies to systemic problems and negative spill-over effects in the financial and trade sectors and in unsustainable consumption and production patterns. Correspondingly, the SDGs are also more integrated as regards the three dimensions of sustainable development (ecological, economic, social) than the MDGs were. This is shown in the cross-referencing between individual goals and targets.[5]

However, reactions to the 2030 Agenda also reveal *conflict lines*. Conservative US media, for example, reject the SDGs as unacceptable interference with the way of life of free citizens.[6] Moreover, North-South conflicts continue to flare up. Already during the negotiations, for example, many developing countries, whose priority is poverty reduction, rejected the term "planetary boundaries"[7]. Also, negotiators conjured up the spirit of a "New Global Partnership" for the means of implementation. Nevertheless, donor, developing and emerging countries argued (and still argue) about the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities", debating about how to share costs fairly, or about the relative importance of official development assistance and technology transfer (which was a demand from developing and emerging countries) versus the mobilisation and effective use of domestic resources or innovative multi-stakeholder partnerships (which were concerns of

donor countries). Moreover, there is no consensus, for example, on the interpretation of human rights, on gender issues, the role and rights of women or families, or the principle of respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty. Other divergences have intensified, partly because of the US's increasing opposition to multilateral agreements (climate, trade), and partly because of the debate on the right to development and development models (including the US against China). These divergences of interests were pacified during the negotiations with political compromises, but not truly resolved.

It is even likely that these conflicts will intensify in future, since both the UN system and member states now face the difficult task of implementing the 2030 Agenda. Following the general planning phase, the global goals will have to be translated into concrete measures. The SDGs formulate objectives, but do not specify *how* they are to be achieved — nor could UN member states ever agree on that. These measures will have to be bold, integrated and systemic if they are to be truly transformative. However, the more concrete the measures, the greater the risk that they will reflect technocrats' narrow concerns only for their own sector and own interests. Policy coherence — always politically difficult to achieve — gains even greater importance in the context of implementing the SDGs.[8] For implementation measures to be considered appropriate, they must be developed across departments, be based on an integrated impact assessment, and be the result of fully participatory processes. Optimally, they should also include an evaluation to enable continuous policy learning and improvement.[9]

In the negotiations there were conflicts over the definition of such *follow-up and review procedures* on implementation efforts. In 2012, during the Rio+20 conference, member states could not agree on a procedure, but laid the foundation for one with the decision to establish the HLPF. In 2013, the General Assembly adopted a resolution on its mandate and format, including regular reviews.[10] The HLPF is now

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5 See, e.g., Norichika Kanie, Steven Bernstein, Frank Biermann and Peter M. Haas, "Introduction", in *Governing through Goals. Sustainable Development Goals as Governance Innovation*, ed. Norichika Kanie and Frank Biermann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 12.

6 See, e.g., *Fox News*, 29 September 2015, http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/09/29/un-ignores-science-council-warnings-in-creating-vast-sustainable-development.html and *Fox News*, 26 June 2016, https://www.google.com/search?q=As+UN+pushes+radical+Sustainable+Development+Goals%2C+scientists+are+trying+to+make+sense+of+them&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-ab (accessed 18 June 2018).

7 The expression *planetary boundaries* describes the finiteness of global resources in various biophysical categories: Johan Rockström et al., "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity", *Nature* 461 (September 2009): 472−75.

8 Louis Meulemann, *Promoting Policy and Institutional Coherence for the Sustainable Development Goals*, Paper for the Committee of Experts on Public Administration (E/C.16/2018/2) (New York: UN, 14 February 2018).

9 See also OECD, ed., *Council Recommendation on Regulatory Policy and Governance* (Paris: OECD, 2012).

10 UNGA, *Format and Organizational Aspects of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development* (A/RES/67/290) (New York: UN, August 2013).

at the heart of the UN sustainable development governance; its working methods and practices are therefore at the core of this study.

Focus: Working Methods and Practices

Some of the international relations literature has been increasingly looking at *shared practices* as the "driving force behind the formation of order and change".[11] Here, the practices used in everyday international politics have become the focus of scientific interest. The authors usually found their theories on research results from the literature on bureaucratic politics or organisational learning.[12] Many of them advocate going beyond the controversial theoretical debate on whether structures or actors are crucial to results — the two factors are seen by them as being mutually constitutive and are both efficacious for the chosen practices and policy outcomes. The broader scientific literature on the United Nations is also dealing with working methods and practices — whether the Charter and other documents are examined from a legal perspective,[13] the negotiation processes by diplomacy experts,[14] or the UN bureaucracy from an administrative-science perspective.[15]

Within the UN itself, debates on improving work routines have been going on almost since the organisation was founded. Experts criticise the struggles for power and interests that often take priority, the lack

of knowledge or capacities, and the persistence of certain standard procedures and discourses as problems that typically hinder the work of the UN.[16] An example of a successful political initiative concerning the UN's *working methods* are the efforts of the so-called S-5 Group (Small Five Group: Costa Rica, Jordan, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Singapore). The Group has advocated "modern working methods" for the Security Council, which it considered essential for the Council to function more efficiently.[17] The S-5 proposals for reorganisation focused primarily on the format of meetings, type of information and information gathering, and access for non-governmental actors. Informal new working methods (without any change to the rules of procedure) achieved more transparency and participation in decision-finding and decision-making processes.[18] It has not been possible, however, to formalise the new working methods that have since become common practice. Resistance came from the P-5, the five permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, USA) — who benefit most from the existing rules of procedure. De facto, however, the member states are making active use of the new formats.

> **Major reform proposals have less chance of finding consensus than incremental changes at the level of working methods.**

The basic assumption underlying such initiatives — and this study — is that major reform proposals have less chance of finding consensus than incremental changes at the level of working methods. The latter are easier to effect, but they can still bring about substantial improvement.[19] Another example

11 Frank Gadinger, "Praxistheorie in den internationalen Beziehungen", in *Handbuch Internationale Beziehungen*, ed. Frank Sauer and Carlo Masala (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2017), 399; Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

12 Christopher M. Jones, "Bureaucratic Politics and Organizational Process Models", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2017), f—7, http://internationalstudies.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-2 (accessed 14 June 2018). Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method and Practice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

13 Simon Chesterman, Ian Johnstone and David Malone, *Law and Practice of the United Nations. Documents and Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

14 Courtney B. Smith, *Politics and Process at the United Nations. The Global Dance* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006).

15 Julian Junk, "Der Beitrag der Verwaltungswissenschaft für das Lehr- und Forschungsfeld UN Studies", in *UN Studies. Umrisse eines Lehr- und Forschungsfeldes*, ed. Manuel Fröhlich (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008), 142—59.

16 See, e.g., Stephen Browne and Thomas G. Weiss, *Making Change Happen. Enhancing the UN's Contributions to Development* (New York: World Federation of UN Associations, 2012).

17 Pascale Baeriswyl, "Backdoor Revolution. Modern Working Methods for a More Efficient UN Security Council", *German Review on the United Nations* 61, no. 5 (2013): 195—200.

18 Helmut Volger, "Mehr Transparenz und mehr Beteiligung. Die informelle Reform der Arbeitsmethoden des UN-Sicherheitsrats", *Vereinte Nationen* 58, no. 5 (2010): 195—203; Martin Niemetz, *Reforming UN Decision-Making Procedures. Promoting a Deliberative System for Global Peace and Security* (London: Routledge, 2015).

19 See Marc Engelhardt, *Weltgemeinschaft am Abgrund. Warum wir eine starke UNO brauchen* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2018).

is the procedure that has been used for selecting the current UN Secretary-General: instead of being selected by the Security Council, as the Charter foresees, part of the process was moved to the UN General Assembly by its President. All candidates presented themselves to the member states and answered their questions in informal dialogues.[20] The results of this process could then hardly be circumvented. This has set new standards that will probably be difficult to undo.

Practices and working methods within the UN are thus the central subject of the following analysis (which will use the two terms synonymously). They refer to all kinds of formal guidelines and rules for the functioning of UN bodies, but also informal practices. This includes mandates, negotiation formats, coordination and decision-making processes, cooperation with non-state actors, knowledge transfer, resource management and financing regulations, and other systematic collective practices and work routines. The study's empirical focus is on intergovernmental processes, specifically on the practices and working methods in the negotiation processes for the SDGs and during the annual HLPF. Its analysis is based on an evaluation of existing literature and reports, as well as participatory observation and on-site discussions with participants and observers of the negotiation processes and HLPF (2011—2018). In the final section, the results of the analysis are placed in the context of the UN reforms currently being negotiated in New York.

Benchmark: Strengthening Result-Orientation

As mentioned above, the 2030 Agenda sets extremely high standards: no less than "transforming our world" towards sustainable development. However, this newly postulated paradigm of a more systemic, integrated and inclusive approach to sustainable development is far from established. Moreover, the very concept of multilateralism has been in a serious political crisis ever since. And yet it is precisely the function of multilateral institutions to stabilise mutual expec-

tations regarding the behaviour of cooperation partners, especially in crisis situations. Ideally, these institutions should promote evidence-based learning, enable political decision-making on collective solutions, and then help with implementation and follow-up. For this to succeed, however, structures and processes intended to lead to decisions must be well-developed, and resources must be made available for them. This is the basic idea behind the "*Fit for Purpose*" discussion that has gained traction within the UN since 2014.[21] This is not necessarily a case of constantly expanding institutions, but also of curbing bureaucratic proliferation and (re-)aligning structures and processes with goals (form follows function).

The political will of member states to reform the UN is usually limited to cost-saving — or at least cost-neutral — options, which must additionally be in line with the interests of the respective states. To that extent, even the Trump administration supports UN reforms.[22]

A "backdoor revolution" could be more promising.

Demands for far-reaching reforms that would require a change to the UN Charter, however well they sound, are unlikely to find consensus and might even generate more resistance than necessary.[23] In the current political situation it seems more sensible to follow a piecemeal approach, reforming the working methods so as to increase their effectiveness and efficiency.[24] Such a "backdoor revolution" could be more promising.[25]

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20   Mette Holm, "Nudging the Decision on UN Secretary General from the Security Council", *Huffington Post*, 1 October 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/mette-holm/nudging-the-decision-on-u_b_14076596.html?guccounter=1 (accessed 14 June 2018). This was based on the following resolution: UNGA, *Revitalization of the Work of the General Assembly* (A/RES/69/321) (New York: UN, 22 September 2015).

21   The term was coined in 2014 by Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson and further developed by John Hendra, Senior Coordinator "UN Fit for Purpose".

22   See the 2017 Political Declaration for UN Reform High Level Event initiated by US Ambassador Nikki Haley and signed by 132 member states, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1310817/files/A_72_532_Rev-1-EN.pdf (accessed 18 June 2018). See also Josef Braml, "Amerikas Forderung nach UN-Reformen", *Vereinte Nationen* 66, no. 1 (2018): 9—14.

23   As, for example, the call for a "Global Sustainable Development Council" armed with sanctions on a par with the UN Security Council; thus Federal Development Minister Müller 2015 in an interview with ZEIT Online, https://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2015-09/bundesentwicklungsminister-gerd-mueller-un-nachhaltigkeitsziele/komplettansicht (accessed 18 June 2018).

24   Sven Bernhard Gareis, "Eine unendliche Geschichte? Die Reform der Hauptorgane der Vereinten Nationen", in

At the same time, the *principles* of the 2030 Agenda should be upheld, even against political resistance. All reform efforts should enable the HLPF to best implement the added value of the 2030 Agenda, in particular its focus on transformation, interlinkages (synergies and trade-offs between goals) and policy coherence, as well as accountability to citizens and the principle to "Leave No One Behind". To this end, the HLPF can and should generate politically relevant results as per its mandate, to provide *policy leadership and guidance* on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This is the central benchmark for evaluating the HLPF's working methods and practices.

How then should the HLPF's working methods and practices be reformed? But before going there, a look back will help to empirically underpin the corresponding proposals: What lessons can be learned from the negotiation processes on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda? And how are the current working methods of the HLPF to be assessed?

Die Vereinten Nationen vor globalen Herausforderungen, ed. Helmut Volger and Norman Weiß (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag Potsdam, 2011), 41—55 (42f.).

25   Baeriswyl, "Backdoor Revolution" (see note 17).

Looking Back: The Negotiations on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda

The negotiation processes on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda in 2013−2015 involved interesting new working methods and practices. These include (1) other negotiation formats, (2) more meaningful participation processes, (3) more intensive UN coordination mechanisms, and (4) a multi-level approach to implementation and review.

The OWG: Innovative Negotiation Formats

In late 2013, in accordance with the Outcome Document of the Rio+20 Conference, the General Assembly set up the so-called *Open Working Group* (OWG), which was to submit a proposal on a list of SDGs to the next General Assembly. Throughout 2014 the OWG developed a catalogue of 17 SDGs, which ultimately remained the same, except for a few changes. As the following analysis will show, many of the participants and observers agree that this success was due to the OWG's innovative working methods.

The starting point was that, according to the Rio+20 Outcome Document, the OWG was to decide on its "method of work". The *composition* of the OWG was innovative in itself: since interest in working in the OWG was high, 72 member states ultimately shared the 30 seats.[26] This format created opportunities for entirely new coalitions,[27] and moderated the normally dominant role of the usual negotiating groups. Accordingly, at least in the beginning, group-based priorities were less visible, whether in the North-South conflict line, i.e. the Group of 77 and China (currently 134 developing countries) 'against' the industrialised countries or the EU, or in other constellations.[28]

Many observers agree that the way the two *co-chairs* conducted the negotiations has played a decisive role, both in the OWG and later in the intergovernmental negotiations under the General Assembly. The Kenyan UN Ambassador Macharia Kamau,[29] co-chaired both negotiations, first as co-chair of the OWG (together with the Hungarian UN Ambassador Csaba Körösi), and then as co-facilitator with the Irish UN Ambassador David Donoghue. This provided for continuity over the two negotiation rounds and kept the number of changes to the SDGs as proposed by the OWG to a minimum. The two ambassadors also led the difficult intergovernmental negotiations on the other three parts of the 2030 Agenda (declaration, means of implementation, follow-up and review). When it came to the drafting of the document, they succeeded in "holding the pen" for a long time, circulating a *zero draft* relatively late in the process (1 June

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26 Felix Dodds, David Donoghue and Jimena Leiva Roesch, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals. A Transformational Agenda for an Insecure World* (Milton Park/New York: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2017), 31f.

27 Pamela S. Chasek and Lynn M. Wagner, "Breaking the Mold: A New Type of Multilateral Sustainable Development Negotiation", *International Environmental Agreements: Politics,*

Law and Economics 16, no. 3 (June 2016): 397−413; Olav Kjørven, "The Unlikely Journey to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", *Impakter*, 8 December 2016, https://impakter.com/impakter-essay-unlikely-journey-2030-agenda-sustainable-development/ (accessed 14 June 2018).

28 Other groups are, for example, the African or Arab group, the small island developing states (SIDS), the least developed countries, land-locked developing countries, or middle-income countries.

29 Macharia Kamau, Pamela Chasek and David O'Connor, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy. The Inside Story of the Sustainable Development Goals* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

2015) and soon afterwards (2 August 2015) adopting the sixth version revised under their aegis.[30] This is unusual as, towards the end of such negotiations, changes are normally negotiated sentence by sentence, which often produces long documents that are relatively void of content. The fact that the OWG has agreed to another procedure is generally seen as an expression of extraordinary leadership and the high degree of trust and ownership that had developed over the long phase of consultations.[31] It also helped that, due to the unusually high and dense frequency of the meetings, the same negotiators met again and again.

The working methods of the OWG also enabled a high degree of argument-based *deliberation*. During the so-called "stocktaking process" content was discussed both broadly and for a comparatively long time (about a year) without any concrete text proposal being negotiated. The two co-chairs worked closely with non-state actors, both NGOs and experts (see the next section). According to scientific studies, such a deliberative mode can be more productive than an interest-driven mode of negotiation ("arguing" versus "bargaining").[32] Only at the very end did several power-driven interventions by individual member states lead to a weakening of individual wordings in the document.[33] One critical analysis even speaks of a creeping "de-politicisation" of the SDGs through "inflation" and the associated softening of policy goals — as the result of both broad stakeholder par-

ticipation and intergovernmental compromises.[34] In general, however, state and non-state actors praised the process as transparent, fair, participatory and largely oriented towards balance and understanding.

Enhanced Cooperation with Non-State Actors

In the run-up to the SDG negotiations, non-state actors had already submitted concrete proposals on lists of goals.[35] Moreover, the "High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Agenda", appointed by the UN Secretary-General in 2012, consulted globally and presented its report in May 2013.[36] These reports had considerable influence on the discussion about SDG design.

During the negotiations, cooperation with non-state actors reached new heights. First, there were the consultations and statements of the *Major Groups and other Stakeholders* (MGoS) usually involved in these UN processes.[37] In addition, the two co-chairs held one-hour-long morning meetings with non-state actors during the OWG. Those who observed the negotiations could see and hear again and again that proposals from these informal rounds were taken up in the official meetings and later also in the text.[38]

The potential of social media and the Internet has also been used for global consultations. The Post-2015

30 David Donoghue, *My Perspective on the SDG Negotiations, 2016* (blog entry on former Deliver-2030 website; printed by author). Dodds, Donoghue and Roesch, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals* (see note 26), 76.

31 Chasek and Wagner, "Breaking the Mold" (see note 27); Kjørven, "Unlikely Journey" (see note 27); Donoghue, *My Perspective* (see note 30).

32 Cornelia Ulbert and Thomas Risse "Deliberately Changing the Discourse: What Does Make Arguing Effective?", *Acta Politica* 40, no. 3 (2005): 351—67. However, others question these findings: see Jens Steffek, "Deliberation and Global Governance", in *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory*, ed. Chris Brown and Robyn Eckersley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 440—52.

33 Bhumika Muchhala, "Last-minute Lack of Transparency Weakens Sustainable Development Goals", *The Guardian*, 13 August 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/aug/13/lack-of-transparency-sustainable-development-goals-negotiations-united-nations (accessed 18 June 2018).

34 Manuel Rivera, "Entpolitisierung im Konsens. Ein kritischer Blick auf die Entstehung der SDG", in *Globale politische Ziele. Bestandsaufnahme und Ausblick des Post-2015 Prozesses*, ed. Philipp Lepenies and Elena Sondermann (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017), 219—46.

35 E.g. Centre for International Governance Innovation, ed., *Toward a Post-2015 Development Paradigm* (Waterloo, 2011).

36 UN, ed., *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development. The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda* (New York: UN, 30 May 2013), 30—31.

37 Since the first Rio Conference in 1992, Agenda 21 has identified nine major groups that play a special role in sustainable development. These are (1) women, (2) children and youth, (3) indigenous peoples, (4) non-governmental organisations, (5) local authorities, (6) workers and trade unions, (7) business and industry, (8) scientific and technological community, (9) farmers. "Other stakeholders" were added at the Rio+20 Conference in 2012, including volunteers, persons with disabilities, educational institutions and the group on ageing.

38 See also Donoghue, *My Perspective* (see note 30) and Kamau et al., *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy* (see note 29).

Task Team (led by UNDP) was at the heart of many of these activities and initiated national and thematic consultations on the SDGs, which were later evaluated for the Secretary General's panel and the OWG.[39] Individuals were also able to participate in the consultations as part of the "MyWorld" survey and via the "World-We-Want" website. An important basis for this was the high level of transparency in the negotiations, which were live-streamed online. This made it possible for observers even outside of New York to closely align their submissions with the current state of negotiations. The "Beyond 2015" campaign, supported by NGOs, mobilised for this worldwide.

Business actors also participated directly in the negotiations, for example through the Major Group Business & Industry. In addition, companies were informed about the SDG negotiations by the UN Global Compact Office. As a result, economic actors were able to consider from an early stage what the SDGs would mean for companies' core business and sustainability reporting. Since 2015, the Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development have developed a whole series of tools to enable companies to align their activities with the SDGs. Corporate foundations also took up the SDGs. For example, some of them (including Rockefeller, Hilton, Ford and Master Card Foundation) set up a specific "SDG Philanthropy Fund" to finance, for example, data analysis or partnerships for the SDGs. The media-supported "Project Everyone" disseminated film spots and other visual information, not least the now well-known SDG icons.[40]

Lastly, many *experts* were involved in the consultations. The Major Group Scientific and Technological Community was not very visible at first. But many scientists were directly involved in the negotiations. Other parties to the process also worked with scientific findings and concepts. Environmental NGOs, for example, engaged with the findings on planetary boundaries and tried to anchor them in the list of goals. Many participants found the 'informal retreats' useful that were organised by the "Independent Research Forum"[41] during the negotiations: here mem-

ber states were able to discuss their questions openly and confidentially with experts. Moreover, new networks of experts were founded, and existing networks took up the SDGs. In 2012, Jeffrey Sachs asked Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his support in establishing the "Sustainable Development Solutions Network" (SDSN). Initially conceived as a scientific network, the SDSN has now grown into a globally active network of experts. The SDSN Secretariat was considered influential in the context of the post-2015 debate. As early as 2013, the SDSN submitted a proposal for a list of ten goals, which was repeatedly developed further through multiple public consultation rounds.[42] A similar process followed to elaborate suggestions for the SDGs' indicators.[43] In 2015, two established international scientific umbrella associations (the International Council for Science, ICSU, and the International Social Science Council, ISSC) coordinated a "review" of the freshly negotiated goals and targets with global scientific participation.[44] The German Research Foundation (DFG) also organised an event in New York and discussed the role of science for the upcoming SDGs.[45] The DFG also supports the international research programme "Future Earth".[46] Finally, many scientists participated in the first (pilot) issues of the *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR) in 2014−2016.[47] This report is intended to bundle scientific contributions on the SDGs for the HLPF.

39 Kjørven, "Unlikely Journey" (see note 27).

40 See https://www.globalgoals.org/ (accessed 18 June 2018).

41 This was supported by eleven research institutes, including the World Resources Institute, Overseas Development Institute, Stockholm Environment Institute, and other institutes from Asia, Latin America and Africa.

42 SDSN, *An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Report (New York, 2013).

43 SDSN, *Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for Sustainable Development Goals: Launching a Data Revolution for the SDGs*, Report (New York, 2015).

44 ICSU/ISSC, *Review of Targets for the Sustainable Development Goals: The Science Perspective*, (Paris: International Council for Science, 2015).

45 See Marianne Beisheim, Hedda Lokken, Nils aus dem Moore, Laszlo Pinter and Wilfried Rickels, *Measuring Sustainable Development. How can Science Contribute to Realizing the SDGs?*, Working Paper FG 8, 2015/02 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2015).

46 German Committee Future Earth, *The Contribution of Science in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals* (Stuttgart, 2016).

47 Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsdreport (accessed 18 June 2018).

Improved Internal UN Coordination

The added value of the 2030 Agenda lies above all in the fact that the goals and targets — which themselves are not necessarily new — have been more systematically and closely interwoven than in previous UN agreements. This feature was founded on the insight that "transformation" will not be achieved through individual measures in individual policy areas. Rather, systemic relationships have to be taken into account and far-reaching changes are necessary in order to successfully deal with the structural causes of mostly complex problems.[48] However, many trade-offs have yet to be resolved within the 17 SDGs and their 169 targets.

All this now places high demands on the UN system (as well as on member states) for implementation, in terms of coordination, cooperation and coherence — demands that have long occupied the UN and rarely been fully met in the past.[49] Observers underline the importance of *inter-agency task forces* for the SDG negotiations.[50] The "UN System Task Team" (UNTT) and later the "Technical Support Team"(TST) prepared background papers and reports that structured the negotiations and drove their content. Many stakeholders, including the Co-Chairs, especially praised the contributions of UNDESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) to the negotiations. The Department is part of the United Nations Secretariat. The former "Division on Sustainable Development" (DSD) operated as HLPF secretariat until 2018.

Experienced observers like to recall experiences from the Rio process.[51] One year after the 1992 Rio Summit, the "Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development" was set up to ensure effective coopera-

tion and coordination within the UN system.[52] "Task managers" were appointed for individual Agenda 21 programme items to develop coordinated implementation measures in cooperation with relevant organisations.[53] However, while negotiating the 2030 Agenda, negotiators found the model "silo-ish". However, following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, it became clear that competencies and leadership needed to be clarified. Currently, the UN refers to *custodian agencies*, i.e. it assigns a kind of curatorial role to certain UN units which take over coordination services for an SDG (but without being solely responsible for the respective goal). Nevertheless, dealing with infighting over competencies and turf wars for resources remains a challenge.

Multi-Level and Bottom-Up Approach to Implementation and Review

Unlike with the MDGs, a *follow-up and review* mechanism for the SDGs was already established in the 2030 Agenda itself. This is remarkable, because resistance to any kind of monitoring or reporting was initially very high. No such procedure for the SDGs could be agreed at the Rio+20 Conference in 2012, not even within the initial framework of the HLPF envisaged in the Rio+20 Outcome Document. It was only in 2013 that the resolution on the HLPF stipulated that regular reviews should take place within its framework from 2016 onwards.[54]

The 2030 Agenda provides for an annual *Progress Report* by the Secretary-General. This is complemented by a more detailed "SDG Report" from the UN Statistical Commission, covering all 17 SDGs goals and the more than 230 indicators. These indicators were developed by the "Inter-agency and Expert Group on

48 See also Marianne Beisheim and Susanne Dröge," Klimapolitik und 2030-Agenda — Potentiale für nachhaltiges Navigieren", in *Ausblick 2017: Krisenlandschaften. Konfliktkonstellationen und Problemkomplexe internationaler Politik*, ed. Volker Perthes, SWP-Studie 1/2017 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2017), 59—62.

49 Joachim Müller, "United Nations System Coordination: The Challenge of Working Together", in *Journal of International Organization Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 29—56.

50 Kjørven, "Unlikely Journey" (see note 27).

51 Jan-Gustav Strandenaes, *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development — W(h)ither Its Success?*, November 2016, https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The_2030_Agenda_-_Whither_its_success_JG_Strandenaes.pdf (accessed 18 June 2018).

52 Jerry Pubantz and John Allphin Moore, Jr., "Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD)", in *Encyclopedia of the United Nations* (New York: Facts On File, 2010).

53 From 2001, this task was assumed by the newly created UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), which created new coordination mechanisms, such as UN Water and UN Energy. See CEB, *Annual Overview Report of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination for 2017* (E/2018/48) (New York: UN, 26 February 2018).

54 UNGA, *Format and Organizational Aspects* (see note 10).

SDG Indicators" in 2015—2017 and are now to be continuously developed further.[55]

In addition, the 2030 Agenda encourages member states to conduct *Voluntary National Reviews* (VNRs) as "regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational level" and then report back to the HLPF.[56] These national reviews at the HLPF "shall be voluntary, while encouraging reporting".[57] From the outset, the idea was to promote national implementation through a bottom-up review process.[58] To this end, the VNRs in the HLPF are to be preceded by national implementation and review processes that fully involve both government and society (whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach). In accordance with the 2030 Agenda's principle of universality, this is expected of *all* member states. In addition, reviews should also take place at the *regional* level. However, as member states did not agree on the role of the regional forums, they negotiated an individual solution whereby each region should seek an appropriate regional forum.

The fact that these review processes had already been agreed upon with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda has led to the rapid establishment of respective work processes at the national, regional, and global level. This in turn keeps the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on the cards and contributes to a relatively high degree of continuity in working towards the goals. At the UN, the HLPF is at the heart of these processes. However, its mandate was decided by member states in 2013 — in other words, before the 2030 Agenda was adopted. This now creates problems with its working methods and practices.

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55   See https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/ (accessed 27 February 2018).

56   UNGA, *2030 Agenda* (see note 1), para. 79.

57   Ibid., para. 84.

58   Marianne Beisheim, *Reviewing the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and Partnerships. A Proposal for a Multi-level Review at the High-level Political Forum*, SWP Research Paper 1/2015 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2015), 7f.

UN-HLPF Interim Assessment: Analysis and Recommendations on Working Methods and Practices

Since 2013, the HLPF has brought together delegations from all UN member states in New York. They meet annually in July for eight days under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as well as every four years for a further two days in September at the level of heads of state and government under the auspices of the General Assembly. Both the UN General Assembly resolution on the HLPF adopted in 2013 and the 2030 Agenda attribute to the HLPF "a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes".[59] What working methods and practices are being used to implement this "central role" now, that is three years into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs?

The mandate of the HLPF was very broadly formulated in 2013, which now determines — and burdens — the annual programme planning. Among other things, various reports are expected to be addressed, such as the Secretary-General's annual SDG progress report and other reports from the UN system, the regional commissions, reports on the various thematic areas, and reports on financing for development (see Chart 1, p. 19). The HLPF is also supposed to pay particular attention to regional developments as well as the special needs and concerns of different country groups.

The HLPF is in danger of falling victim to its own success.

This wealth of input and tasks means that reports are usually only taken note of, but that their results are not evaluated or discussed, and no decisions based on them are made. At the same time, political and societal interest in the HLPF is high (see Table 1, p. 18), as are expectations. The HLPF is thus in danger of falling victim to its own success if it cannot fulfil the high demands with current processes and resources.

The working methods and practices of five important building blocks of the HLPF will be analysed below: (1) *Thematic and SDG reviews* as well as (2) the *Voluntary National Reviews* are meant to evaluate the implementation status and promote learning processes. For the *inclusion of non-state actors*, the HLPF has a mandate to provide (3) a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of the MGoS and other relevant stakeholders. (4) A scientific report, the *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR), is also mandated. The HLPF specifies (5) a *Ministerial Declaration* as its outcome.

Thematic and SDG Reviews: Need More Preparation to Add Value

The 2030 Agenda mandates the HLPF to hold "thematic reviews of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, including cross-cutting issues".[60] In 2016, member states agreed in a resolution to discuss each year at the HLPF an overarching theme *(Thematic Reviews)* and to discuss selected SDGs in more detail *(SDG Reviews)* (see Table 2).[61]

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59   UNGA, *2030 Agenda* (see note 1), para. 82.

60   UNGA, *2030 Agenda* (see note 1), para. 85.

61   UNGA, *Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the Global Level* (A/RES/70/299), 29 July 2016, para. 2 — 5.

Table 1

Signs for Growing Interest in HLPF

	2016	2017	2018	2019
Senior Government Representatives*		77	125	
Registered Participants/Stakeholders*	1,500	2,458	2,200	
Reporting Countries (VNRs)	22	43	46	51
Side Events		147	260	

* Data sets vary and cannot be consistently compared over time.
Source: Own compilation using UN-HLPF website.

Table 2

HLPF Thematic and SDG Reviews

	Thematic Review	SDG Reviews
2017	Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world	SDG 1 No Poverty, SDG 2 No Hunger, SDG 3 Good Health, SDG 5 Gender Equality, SDG 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG 14 Life Below Water
2018	Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies	SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 7 Affordable and Clean Energy, SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities, SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production, SDG 15 Life on Land
2019	Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality	SDG 4 Quality Education, SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 11 Reduced Inequalities, SDG 13 Climate Action, SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

By the end of the first four-year cycle, all 17 SDGs should have been reviewed "in-depth", taking into account their "integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature".[62] This is precisely where the *added value* of these reviews with the HLPF could and should lie: a solid and honest analysis of the state of implementation with special attention to the principles of the 2030 Agenda (transformative, integrated, inclusive, etc.), on the basis of which politically relevant recommendations for further implementation can then be generated.

62 Ibid., para. 2 and 5.

The reality is different. In 2017, three three-hour panels for the Thematic Reviews and one two-hour panel each for the SDG Reviews took place during the first week of the HLPF. In 2018 this was reversed to create more time for SDG reviews. In 2018 UNDESA also tried to give the panels more structural strength. First, a short statistical assessment of each SDG's targets was given. Representatives of member states, international and regional organisations as well as academia and society were asked to focus their panel contributions on country experiences and lessons learned, also discussing synergies and trade-offs among the SDGs and with other SDGs. This was followed by a

Chart 1

Extensive Tasks of the HLPF
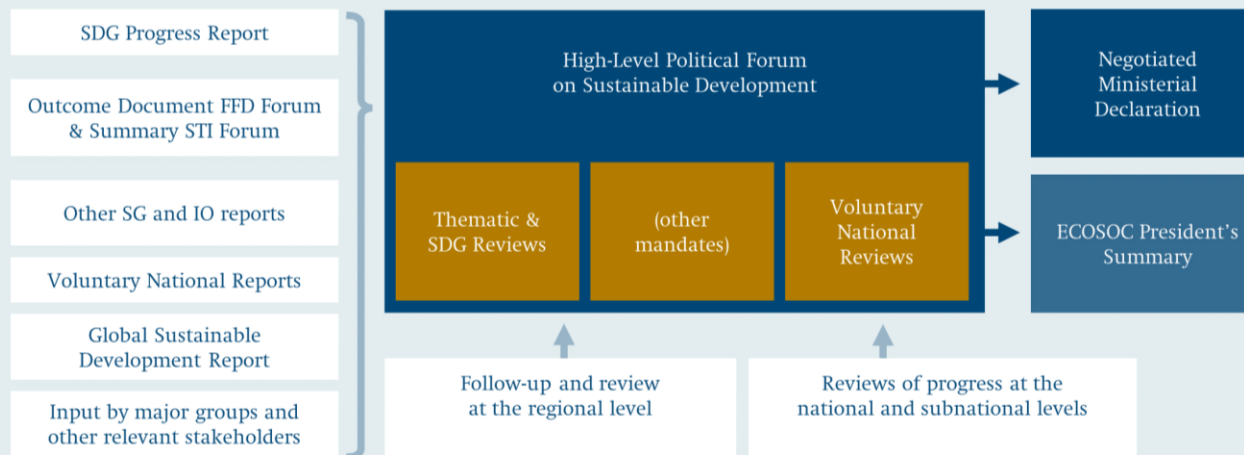
© 2018 Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Chart based on Eleni Dellas, Alexander Carius, Marianne Beisheim, Susan Parnell and Dirk Messner, *Local and Regional Governments in the Follow-up and Review of Global Sustainability Agendas* (Berlin and Brussels: adelphi/Cities Alliance, 2018), 18.

debate in plenary session (usually very short, for lack of time).

In view of the time pressures, good *preparatory and follow-up processes* are essential. The 2030 Agenda already provides for the sensible use of existing review procedures (including their reports, data, and analyses).[63] Thematic Reviews will be supported "by reviews by the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council and other intergovernmental bodies and forums which should reflect the integrated nature of the Goals as well as the interlinkages between them".[64] To implement this mandate, working groups of the extended Executive Committee for Economic and Social Affairs (ECESA Plus, a coordination platform originally used to prepare for the Rio+20 Conference) evaluate the material from the UN system on the SDGs being reviewed. They present the results in short reports (background notes),[65] which are consolidated before the HLPF in an Expert Group Meeting.

63 UNGA, *2030 Agenda* (see note 1), para. 74f.: The reviews should "build on existing platforms and processes [… and] avoid duplication".
64 Ibid., para. 85.
65 See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2018#inputs (accessed 18 June 2018).

However, even experts are unaware of these well-structured background notes, including their references to interlinkages and some recommendations. The HLPF did not work with them on the podiums either in 2017 or in 2018. Yet these papers could help to make discussions more focused and result-oriented. The underlying problem is twofold: first, these papers have no official status; second, UNDESA has no funds to reimburse experts' travel costs to the panels. Those who participate on a self-financed basis come mainly to present the work of their own organisation; however, this is not necessarily what is most needed.

One example of a relatively good preparatory and follow-up process was the review of SDG 14 (Life below Water) in 2017. In preparation, a three-day global *Oceans Conference* was held in New York in June 2017. The SDG review at the HLPF then referred to the results of the conference. The decision to hold the conference was taken by the General Assembly in December 2015, which led to a comparatively stringent preparatory process. One of the main organisers of the conference, the then-President of the General Assembly, Ambassador Peter Thomson, was appointed Special Envoy for the Ocean by Secretary-General Guterres and is now coordinating follow-up action. In retrospect, some observers criticised the elaborate Oceans Conference for draining much UNDESA energy shortly

before the HLPF in July 2017, and thus making the other HLPF preparations suffer. Currently, its limited capacities do not allow UNDESA to hold such a conference for each SDG.

The preparatory processes for the different *SDG Reviews at the HLPF 2018* varied quite a bit. To prepare the review of SDG 7 *(Energy)*, a global conference was held, this time in late February and co-organised by the regional Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok.[66] Reviewing SDG 7 is difficult because the institutional landscape of the energy sector is fragmented and relevant institutions are located outside the UN system. What was new is that, since October 2017, UNDESA had supported an informal ad hoc group, which helped to prepare the conference and background material for the review of SDG 7. This group included not only energy experts from relevant UN organisations, but also from the International Energy Agency and the World Bank — a prerequisite for policy coherence.[67]

In the *water* sector (SDG 6), the reporting processes are comparatively well established, since joint monitoring programmes have already been put in place for MDG 7. Building on this, UN Water coordinates the monitoring for SDG 6, with various agencies from the UN system providing data and analyses. In pilot projects, SDG 6 monitoring focal points were also established at country level. Next to the national statistical offices these are to include further stakeholders and data. From November 2017 onwards, a UN Water task force prepared a synthesis report for the 2018 HLPF review.[68] This report, however, was published only at the end of June 2018, that is only days before the HLPF held the respective SDG Review.

For SDG 11 *(Cities)*, a special link has been created between the sectoral review of the "New Urban Agenda" and the HLPF, in the form of a report that is to inform the review of SDG 11 every four years.[69]

UN Habitat published the first of these reports in early July 2018 — an impressive publication, but arriving too late to be processed before the HLPF.[70] During the 2018 HLPF, around 200 representatives of local and regional administrative departments participated in the first "Local and Regional Governments' Forum". Some of them also reported on their implementation efforts at the local level. However, since this Forum took place in parallel to the HLPF, it was difficult for delegates to participate.

Various reports are meant to inform the review of SDG 17 *(means of implementation)*. The report of the ECOSOC "Financing for Development (FFD) Forum", which takes place annually in April, is supposed to be discussed at the HLPF.[71] This document with intergovernmentally agreed conclusions and recommendations is negotiated annually before the FFD Forum and is based on a monitoring report prepared by an inter-agency task force.[72] In addition, the co-chairs of the "Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs" (STI Forum), which takes place annually in June, write a "Summary" for the HLPF. Here too, an inter-agency task team supports the preparations. In 2017, a workshop addressed the cross-references between STI and the five SDGs that were up for review at the 2018 HLPF.[73] These documents and processes are a good basis for a substantive review of SDG 17, but they are not sufficiently well-known among HLPF participants. Moreover, the conflicts of interest already described prevent ground-breaking intergovernmental decisions.

66 "Global Preparatory Meeting in Support of the Review of SDG7 at the 2018 UN High-Level Political Forum", https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17609 Global_SDG7_Conference_Main_Programme.pdf (accessed 18 June 2018).

67 See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/energy/adhocgroupgoal7 (accessed 18 June 2018).

68 UN Water, ed., *SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2018 on Water and Sanitation* (Geneva, 2018), http://www.unwater.org/publication_categories/sdg-6-synthesis-report-2018-on-water-and-sanitation/ (accessed 2 August 2018).

69 See also Eleni Dellas, Alexander Carius, Marianne Beisheim, Susan Parnell and Dirk Messner, *Local and Regional*

Governments in the Follow-up and Review of Global Sustainability Agendas (Berlin/Brussels: adelphi and Cities Alliance, February 2018).

70 *SDG 11 Synthesis Report 2018: Tracking Progress towards Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements* (Nairobi, 2018).

71 See http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffdforum/about-the-ffd-forum/index.html (accessed 18 June 2018).

72 Inter-Agency Task Force on Financing Development, http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffd-follow-up/inter-agency-task-force.html (accessed 18 June 2018).

73 See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17745Meeting_report_final.pdf (accessed 18 June 2018).

External communication, thorough analysis, and safeguarding of results continue to need improvement.

Overall, in 2018, the preparatory processes for the Thematic and SDG Reviews were organised much more effectively, while also being better connected with existing processes. Nevertheless, external communication on these preparatory processes, thorough analysis, and safeguarding of results continue to need improvement. A uniform blueprint for the preparatory processes, however, would not make sense since the framework conditions of the SDG Reviews differ. Nevertheless, DESA should be mandated to develop *good practice guidelines* for these reviews that are sufficiently flexible and yet establish and further develop minimum standards. For example, the custodian agencies should urge their task teams to publish a roadmap for a preparatory and follow-up process in good time. Reports to the HLPF must be available much earlier. Only then can solid analyses be carried out and relevant national, regional and international actors coordinate and plan their input. Responsibilities should be clear, without creating "silos" or giving priority to securing resources and mandates. Moreover, the UN should strive to include the international financial institutions in a more meaningful way. Since 2010, this has been the task of ECESA Plus. However, this mechanism has so far essentially been limited to an annual briefing and to coordinating individual background papers.

Above all, the Thematic and SDG Reviews should not only present data on the agreed indicators, but must also *analyse* them. This analysis should focus on relevant interlinkages between goals. Integrated assessments should identify entry points for appropriate and coherent measures in all relevant policy areas.[74] Member states should then discuss recommendations for appropriate action.

In principle, member states must consider how they want to *work with* all these reports on the SDGs more meaningfully within the HLPF framework. For the next four-year cycle (2020−2023), they must also decide how to cluster the goals for the next round of SDGs Reviews and how to best link this to the annual HLPF themes.

Voluntary National Reviews: A Good but Insufficient Approach

By the end of the first four-year cycle, 143 member states will have voluntarily reported to the HLPF on how they are implementing the 2030 Agenda and SDGs at the national level.[75] Germany already reported in 2016 on the first steps and measures implemented or planned by the Federal Government.

Initially, the format of the VNRs was not very well-defined, either for the underlying written reports or for the oral presentations at the HLPF. Shortly after the 2016 HLPF, member states agreed a resolution to clarify the VNR *modalities*.[76] During the debates, some member states questioned much that seemed already to have been settled with the resolution on the HLPF and the 2030 Agenda. The weaknesses of the current follow-up and review mechanism are thus due to political conflict and compromise. The resolution aims at soft learning processes instead of a rigorous review of member states' implementation and accountability to their citizens (as demanded by most NGOs). In the VNRs, member states are meant to inform each other of successes, challenges, and other lessons learned.

Experiences with the VNR format are also expected to generate ideas for new and flexible arrangements for future meetings. The Secretary-General was therefore invited to update his "voluntary common reporting guidelines" for the VNRs on the basis of feedback from member states. For this, UNDESA sends questionnaires to VNR participants after the HLPF and asks for feedback on preparation, guidelines, and presentation format. In general, the resolution calls these guidelines a "suggested tool",[77] thus reaffirming the *voluntary nature* of everything related to the VNRs — a constant concern especially of the Russian Federation, the US, Australia, and the Group of 77 and China.

Meanwhile, UNDESA has put together a rather solid *preparatory process* for the VNRs, including a "Handbook for the preparation of VNRs". They also updated

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74   See also Alexander Müller and Ivonne Lobos Alva, *SDG Thematic Reviews for Integrated Implementation*, 27 July 2017, http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/sdg-thematic-reviews-for-integrated-implementation-what-we-learned-from-a-review-pilot/ (accessed 18 June 2018).

75   162 VNRs in total, minus 19 cases in which countries reported for the second and third time respectively.

76   UNGA, *Follow-up and Review* (see note 61).

77   Ibid., para. 9.

the guidelines in January 2018.[78] However, the status of these guidelines, deliberately designed by the member states to be voluntary, is weak. For example, despite clear guidance, the majority of VNRs dealt only with the goals selected for the SDG Reviews. This was never intended. Rather, as the guidelines stipulate, member states are asked to focus on their own national priorities.

In general, there is strong interest in VNRs at the HLPF. So many countries want to present their VNRs that the Secretariat (and, in fact, the HLPF itself in terms of time) is reaching the limits of its capacity. In 2016, 22 countries reported; in 2017, it was 43; in 2018 the ECOSOC President called a halt at 48 registrations. Based on previous experience, she tried to limit the number to 42 for 2019. Nevertheless, 51 countries want to report in 2019. While the demand is encouraging, it results in extremely limited time per country: only 15 minutes remain for each country to present its VNR individually or in a panel.

In principle, the idea is that the VNR at the HLPF is only the culmination of a *previous national* implementation and review process. In the 2030 Agenda's own words, the VNRs should "promote accountability to our citizens".[79] It is therefore crucial that governments discuss their (draft) reports at the national level first. So far, it is unknown how many did so. In developing countries, UN Country Teams could support such processes. Governments should absolutely not have the reports written by (externally financed) consultants. In New York, government representatives should take the opportunity to share ideas for good implementation measures or ask for support for problems they cannot solve on their own. In part, such input has already inspired mutual learning. For instance, many countries took up the ideas presented during the 2016 VNRs on how newly-created or newly-oriented institutions can guide and coordinate the national implementation of the SDGs. Such learning processes fuel a positive two-level dynamic or a "virtuous circle": national practices inspire other countries, international feedback inspires future national implementation.

As an intermediate step, member states are meant to exchange views and lessons learned at their *regional forums*. However, UN regional commissions are still looking to define their role with regard to the VNRs

and are doing so very differently. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) is rather opposed to the organisation of regional "rehearsals". The UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) hosted a 1.5-day regional forum in Geneva in 2018, with a particular focus on a *peer learning segment*.[80] Member states were invited to identify and discuss case studies from their national contexts for the five focal SDGs. To avoid duplication, the regional forums could in future focus more on regional specifics in the implementation of SDGs, for example by discussing cross-border problems (e.g. river management) or common challenges (e.g. regional climate change or migration).

Hardly any VNR report presents systemic reforms with transformative potential.

Beyond the lack of time at the HLPF for adequate reporting, the *quality* of both written and oral reports must be improved. Some reports work with the official SDG indicators, others do not. Only very few reports offer an in-depth analysis of the data that goes beyond a descriptive presentation of trends or analyse the causes behind the failures or successes. Hardly any report presents systemic reforms with transformative potential or identifies structural barriers to them. Experts like to point out that the presentations need to be characterised by self-critical reflection and should not be a beauty contest. In fact, most VNR presentations focus on development successes. So far, it has been mostly the least developed countries that have presented their challenges. Many presentations are rather technical and avoid politically controversial subjects. For example, neither Turkey nor Egypt nor Venezuela addressed the acute political tensions in their countries during their VNR presentations. In contrast, three other VNRs were highly politicised. Armenia and Azerbaijan accused each other of misinformation during their 2017/18 VNRs (the background being the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict). In their 2018 VNR, Palestine tried at least to outline connections between the conflict with Israel and the lack of

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78 For these documents see https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/ (accessed 18 June 2018).

79 UNGA, *2030 Agenda* (see note 1), para. 73.

80 ECOSOC/ECE, eds., *Report of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region on Its Second Session* (ECE/RFSD/2018/2) (Geneva: UNECE, 20 April 2018).

implementation of the SDGs, but here too the accusations were one-sided.[81]

The *interactive debate* that follows the VNR presentations suffers from several problems. First, despite the specified deadline, written VNR reports are always submitted very late, if at all. This makes it difficult for other HLPF participants to prepare for substantive discussion. Moreover, many reports are only available in the respective national language. Second, the total debating time of 15 minutes per VNR, each with one to two-minute contributions, is too short for more complex reasoning. Third, de facto there has been little substantial feedback from member states to date. State representatives sitting in the plenary session (or not even doing that) were only moderately interested. Too many other parallel meetings, including of the ministers or secretaries of state present, seem to siphon off attention. Thus, many seats are filled by delegation members who do not have a mandate to speak to some VNRs. In 2017 and 2018, there were no contributions at all from the member states. In 2018, only Norway submitted substantive questions and comments on a large proportion of VNRs. And only the Group of Friends of SDG Financing, led by Canada and Jamaica, offered support when countries identified problems. Most entries, however, were reminiscent of the Eurovision Song Contest: neighbouring countries distribute praise and friendly questions, which seem staged. In 2018, some donor countries and other VNR countries delivered prepared statements as well, which again contained mainly praise and soft questions. Only MGoS raised tough questions on human rights violations or bad governance.

The responses of the VNR countries are kept very short due to time constraints. Hence, they are also not likely to interest other member states in mutual learning as intended. In 2017, obviously prepared statements were occasionally read out in place of answers — fortunately no occurrences were observed in 2018. Some countries ignored critical questions from civil society. India set a bad example by not allowing critical questions from civil society — a clear violation of HLPF rules, which grant these actors extensive participation rights. At any rate, to date the HLPF-VNRs have not made countries justify themselves as "duty bearers" before their citizens as "rights holders" (as in the reviews of the UN Human Rights Council) — but then that was neither their mandate, nor is it to be expected in the near future.

The interactive debate should be better prepared and reworked.

Where reforms are concerned, consideration should be given to how the debate could be *better prepared*. So far, lead discussants have only been used for the VNR panel presentations, not the individual presentations; their contributions contained solid feedback on the VNRs. One possibility would be to ask two or three member states to help prepare the interactive debate by actively collecting and processing comments.[82] They should also include shadow reports or parallel reports by civil society in preparing for the discussion. For example, for the Universal Periodic Reviews at the UN Human Rights Council, the Secretariat prepares a "Summary of Stakeholders' Information" for each country. Such a document could then be used by member states to prepare the interactive debate of VNRs at the HLPF. However, this would have to be mandated and Secretariat capacities would need to be increased.

In 2018, UNDESA organised so-called "VNR labs".[83] During these side events in the evening, participants could discuss interlinkages and country experiences in a very focused way. This is what the official VNR panels could look like. In general, less would be more. To focus discussions more on mutual learning processes, presenting states should be asked to outline transformative implementation measures proven to be successful that could inspire other states. They should also highlight particular challenges where they are politically ready to take action but need the support of partners. Thereafter, UNDESA could connect or twin states with partners so as to match demand and supply, for example as regards policy ideas, technologies, financing, or investments. The UN system should also take up the information and adapt its support measures accordingly.

Such a targeted *follow-up of the VNRs* is still lacking. The annual UNDESA "Synthesis Report" is helpful

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81 The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the USA had refused entry visas to the Palestinian delegation. See https://www.apnews.com/e03ad331859f4d1093af4fb849737e3e (accessed 2 August 2018).

82 Similar to the "troika model" of the UN Human Rights Council, see Beisheim, *Review Mechanism* (see note 58), 17f.
83 See the *Informal Summary* https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20582Summary_of_VNR_Labs_CLEARED.pdf (accessed 2 August 2018).

for a cross-country overview of the VNRs.[84] However, there is no explicit mandate and no reliable financing for them. Moreover, the Secretariat, being committed to political neutrality, cannot publish unduly critical analyses. NGO alliances are much more sceptical in their analyses of the VNR reports.[85] The secretariat of the "Partners for Review" network, initiated by the German government, also evaluates the VNR presentations.[86] All these analyses increase the VNRs' visibility, which could help them to be taken more seriously in future. But their potential for implementing the 2030 Agenda and SDGs can only be increased if VNR results can be worked on in a more systematic and politically visible way. There is a lack of mandates and resources for this. Moreover, a politically relevant process could be initiated, such as a high-level panel that assesses the results of the VNRs for interesting policy ideas and recommendations to be shared at the 2019 HLPF Summit.

Participation of Non-State Actors: Mixed Results

The resolution on the HLPF adopted in 2013 provides for extensive participation rights for non-state actors at all official meetings.[87] As in the SDG negotiations, contributions from civil society, business or multi-stakeholder partnerships are intended to help implement the 2030 Agenda.

The participation of societal groups in the HLPF is primarily organised through the *Major Groups and other Stakeholders* (MGoS) mentioned above. In 2017, the non-governmental groups organised therein created a complex coordination mechanism for preparing the HLPF and involving as many local groups as possible.[88] The main focus of this work is on the written and oral comments, starting with the negotiations for the Ministerial Declaration, and during the HLPF the Thematic Reviews, SDG Reviews, and VNRs. The first task must be carried out as early as June, mainly by NGO representatives based in New York. In 2016, the major groups often only read out calls for more participation during the VNRs; in 2018, however, they collected and presented substantial contributions. These need to be coordinated in an elaborate process, since there is only time in each panel for a maximum of one or two statements (of one to two minutes each). This comes at the expense of the depth and quality of the contributions — which were precisely the factors that distinguished them during the SDG negotiations. For the HLPF-VNRs, it has become the custom that questions have to be submitted beforehand. While this may be useful for preparing answers, it should not be possible for member states to reject these questions in advance. Usually, the chairs and moderators of the meetings decide whom they call; they should be briefed to be aware of the participation rights of MGoS. Several countries now have non-governmental representatives in their VNR delegations, some of whom also speak for a few minutes. In 2017, for example, at the last minute, Denmark asked non-governmental representatives to make such a contribution — a move inspired by other countries' VNR presentations.

The relevance of *(shadow) reports* as well as of other comments by societal actors on the VNR reports has already been outlined. These materials should be bundled and made accessible online. The MGoS are also organising side events during HLPF breaks, but increasingly these have to take place also in parallel with official meetings, due to a lack of time. One problem with parallel events is that representatives especially of small delegations are hard-pressed to participate. Moreover, the number of applications for side events is far higher than the UN can implement on its premises. Due to the need to combine different

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84 UNDESA/DSD, *2017 Voluntary National Reviews. Synthesis Report* (February 2018), https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis_Report_VNRs_2017.pdf (accessed 18 June 2018). See also Committee for Development Policy (CDP), *Voluntary National Review Reports – What Do They Report?*, CDP Background Paper no. 46 (New York: UNDESA, July 2018).

85 The *Spotlight Report* (2016 and 2017) of the *Civil Society Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the report *Progressing National SDGs Implementation. An Independent Assessment of the Voluntary National Review Reports Submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017*, published in 2018 by the *Canadian Council for International Co-operation*.

86 Partners for Review, *Comparative Analysis of 43 VNRs Submitted to the HLPF 2017. Non-Paper for Discussion* (April 2018), http://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/P4R-Comparative-analysis-of-2017-VNRs.pdf (accessed 18 June 2018).

87 UNGA, *Format and Organizational Aspects* (see note 10), para. 14, 15, 16, 22.

88 For its specifications, see https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/12947HLPFMGoSCM-ToRJan2017.pdf (accessed 2 August 2018).

side events, panels are often just as overloaded as official plenary sessions, and there is seldom enough time for an in-depth discussion. It is also unclear to what extent results feed back into the HLPF.

The one-day "SDG Business Forum" — another parallel event — is jointly organised by UNDESA, the UN Global Compact, and the International Chamber of Commerce. *Companies and other business actors* have been presenting their implementation activities here since 2016. The phrase "showcase review of business engagement" used on the HLPF website illustrates the nature of the event.[89] Many NGOs criticise this as "bluewashing", in reference to the blue colour of the UN flag. Since 2016, the one-day "Partnership Exchange" has also taken place during the HLPF. Again, this does not provide for a very rigorous review of the UN's partnerships with business. The UN system is still looking for more effective ways to establish multi-stakeholder partnerships for the SDGs whilst protecting its reputation.[90]

Taken together, the time and space for interventions by non-state actors in the official HLPF meetings are extremely limited. Since 2017, non-state observers of the HLPF have even required a secondary pass in addition to the UN Grounds Pass in order to gain access to the conference rooms in the UN building; both are difficult to obtain. Only 30 to 70 seats in the gallery of the negotiation room are available for the more than 2,000 registered non-governmental participants. Also at the national level many NGOs complain about a *shrinking space* for societal actors, both politically and financially.[91] Accordingly, MGoS formulate far-reaching demands for their future participation in the HLPF.[92] To the surprise of many, it is now ECOSOC's NGO Committee, previously so restrictive,

that is to discuss how the participation of non-state actors could be improved.[93]

The Global Sustainable Development Report as Science-Policy Interface

To strengthen the exchange between science and politics at the HLPF, the UN member states proposed a *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR) as long ago as 2012 in Rio. From 2014 to 2016 UNDESA coordinated three pilot editions — until July 2016 when, after long consultations, member states agreed on a mandate for the GSDR, which will now be issued every four years.[94] In December 2016, the Secretary-General appointed the Independent Group of Scientists (IGS), a team of 15 independent international scientists, which is currently working on the 2019 edition of the GSDR. Its mandate is to evaluate existing analyses (as an assessment of assessments) and provide guidance on the state of global sustainable development from a scientific perspective, including examining policy options. It will cover the entire four-year cycle and also investigate new and emerging issues and previously neglected topics. In addition, IGS members are invited to speak annually at the HLPF.

A UN Task Team supports the group of scientists.[95] Nevertheless, compared with other panels, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the IGS is very poorly equipped which limits its working methods. Like the IPCC, the IGS is not meant to conduct new research, but summarise existing research results. However, the IPCC's work process is much more differentiated: it has highly specialised working groups and multi-level peer review and

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89   SDG Business Forum, https://sustainabledevelopment. un.org/hlpf/SDGBusinessForum (accessed 18 June 2018).

90   For more information, see Marianne Beisheim and Anne Ellersiek, *Partnerships for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Transformative, Inclusive and Accountable?* SWP Research Paper 14/2017 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2017).

91   See Civicus, ed., *2018 State of Civil Society Report*, https:// www.civicus.org/index.php/state-of-civil-society-report-2018 (accessed 18 June 2018).

92   MGoS HLPF/Coordination Mechanism/Steering Group, ed., *MGoS Priority Recommendations for Strengthening the HLPF* (New York, March 2017).

93   See para. 22 of the Annex of UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 68/1 on the Strengthening of the Economic and Social Council* (A/RES/72/305) (New York: UN, 25 July 2018).

94   Published as Annex of the 2016 HLPF Ministerial Declaration (E/HLS/2016/1): *Global Sustainable Development Report: Scope, Frequency, Methodology and Relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals Progress Report*, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11 654Annex_Min_declaration_HLPF2016.pdf (accessed 18 June 2018).

95   This consists of members of the UN Secretariat, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, the UN Environment Programme, the UN Development Programme, the UN Conference on Trade and Development, and the World Bank.

coordination processes, many plenary sessions and progress reports, and the negotiated "Summary for Policymakers".[96] The latter is negotiated sentence-by-sentence and thus subject to political influence. The three scientific reports of the IPCC, which together total several thousand pages, are not affected by this. More than 800 scientists worldwide are involved in drafting them.

By necessity, the IGS adopted a different working method for the GSDR 2019. In 2017, it had published an open "Call for Inputs" aimed at scientists and other knowledge carriers worldwide.[97] The call identified four areas in which input was requested: (1) interactions among SDGs and their targets, (2) transformation pathways towards sustainable development; (3) looking beyond the SDGs (major issues identified by research which are not explicitly taken into account in the SDGs), and (4) the role of science for sustainable development. It remains to be seen whether the IGS will succeed in mobilising science — it does not have many incentives to offer. In addition, capacities in developing countries need to be strengthened, since usually only a minimal proportion of scientific studies originate from them. This could be done through national science platforms.

Although there is no uniform recipe for successful science-policy interfaces, some factors are important.

It is difficult to predict what expectations the 2019 GSDR will be able to meet. The scientific debate about such *science-policy interfaces* shows that although there is no uniform recipe for success, some factors are nevertheless important.[98] They include suitable equipment, a secretariat with a budget, the effective communication of results, and action-relevant recommen-

dations. Studies recommend approaches aimed at *mutual* exchange and joint learning.[99] In some cases, they even call for a second expertise with a special mediating function to be included in addition to the specialist expertise, so that findings can be worked up into actionable policy recommendations.[100] Other contributions instead emphasise the relevance of (the often lacking) political receptiveness, especially when recommendations ask for far-reaching change. On the recipient side, too, understanding, incentives and capacities for better research-uptake must therefore be strengthened.[101]

As the Summary of the first Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation noted, the 2030 Agenda is particularly challenging because it is disruptive in its claim to transformation and call for radical change.[102] At the same time, this UN document, like many others, calls for evidence-based policy making and policy coherence, which is of great importance given the integrated approach of the 2030 Agenda. However, it is a (sadly frequent) misjudgement on the part of many subject-oriented scientists to assume that both are almost automatically a goal of politics, and that integrated assessments are therefore correspondingly in demand and effective instruments of policy advice. This underestimates the political dimension of decision making, meaning such factors as conflicting interests, bureaucratic politics and the safeguarding of domain and departmental interests, turf battles over mandates and budgets, and considerations regarding career paths. Representatives from Science and Technology Studies especially emphasise this kind of "politics of science".[103] In part,

96 "Was macht der Weltklimarat? Wie der IPCC zu seinen Ergebnissen kommt", in *Perspektive Erde. Forschung zum globalen Wandel*, 02/2013, ed. BMBF and Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt (September 2013) See also John Broome, "At the IPCC", *London Review of Books Blog*, 8 May 2014, https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2014/05/08/john-broome/at-the-ipcc/ (Zugriff am 3 October 2018).

97 *Global Sustainable Development Report: Call for Inputs*, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17102Call_for_inputs_PDF.pdf, (accessed 18 June 2018).

98 On this debate, see Alexander Bogner and Helge Torgersen, eds., *Wozu Experten? Ambivalenzen der Beziehung von Wissenschaft und Politik* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2005).

99 Anita Engels, "The Science-policy Interface", *The Integrated Assessment Journal* 5, no. 1 (2005): 7−26; Rolf Lidskog and Göran Sundqvist, "When Does Science Matter? International Relations Meets Science and Technology Studies", *Global Environmental Politics* 15, no. 1 (February 2015): 1−20.

100 Thomas Saretzki, "Welches Wissen — wessen Entscheidung? Kontroverse Expertise im Spannungsfeld von Wissenschaft, Öffentlichkeit und Politik", in *Wozu Experten?*, ed. Bogner and Torgersen (see note 98), 345−69.

101 In 2018 the UN Joint Inspection Unit has implemented a project entitled "Strengthening the policy research uptake in service of the 2030 Agenda".

102 ECOSOC, *Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals: Summary by the Co-Chairs* (E/HLPF/2016/6) (New York, 24 June 2016), para. 4.

103 Sheila Jasanoff, *The Fifth Branch: Science Advisors as Policymakers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Sheila Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge: The Co-production of*

this results in the inconsistency of "talk, decision, and action",[104] especially when decision makers are confronted with conflicting demands. In such situations, political action is often characterised by unclear preferences and mixed motives, which makes purely rational decisions unlikely.[105] Scientific advice can only be successful if there is openness to policy alternatives.

Meaningful narratives could be helpful in such situations,[106] as could a broad consensus on what may be considered authoritative knowledge,[107] or a shared perception of problems and challenges (that should go beyond the scientific community).[108] There is a lively debate on whether it is the task of science itself to build such consensus or not: while some vote for science to be independent and autonomous,[109] others — such as the representatives of the international research programme for global sustainability, *Future Earth* — believe that a joint "transdisciplinary"[110] co-production of knowledge is the better approach.[111]

The President of the DFG (German Research Foundation), however, warned against a scientocracy and the tyranny of experts undermining the democratic principles of open societies, and against science losing its openness and pluralism.[112]

What experts agree on is that the high credibility and transparency of scientists' work and transfer processes are important. For example, science should not conceal uncertainties.[113] Thus far, the public knows hardly anything about the GSDR process. The committee lacks the resources for the sophisticated measures mentioned above.

The Ministerial Declaration – without HLPF Results

At the end of the HLPF, which meets annually in July under the auspices of ECOSOC, the member states adopt the Ministerial Declaration, first by acclamation at the end of the HLPF (for the first time by vote in 2018), and then again formally on the following day as part of the ECOSOC President's report to the ECOSOC High-Level Segment.

One problem is that the Ministerial Declaration is already being negotiated *before* the HLPF (usually in June). In other words, it cannot present any HLPF results and incorporates hardly any analysis from the thematic, national, or regional learning processes. Consequently, it is not very action-oriented and does not provide the *political leadership and guidance* for further implementation that is expected from the HLPF according to its mandate.

In addition, the Minster Declaration is negotiated intergovernmentally. Non-state actors can be involved only if the two facilitators (two UN ambassadors who organise the negotiations at the invitation of the President of the General Assembly) support this and no member state objects. Even then, only a few New York based NGO representatives participate in these negotiations.

However, the disappointing outcome document is not only due to the unfortunate timing of the nego-

Science and the Social Order (London: Routledge, 2004); *Wozu Experten?*, ed. Bogner and Torgersen (see note 98).

104 Nils Brunsson, *The Organization of Hypocrisy. Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organizations* (Copenhagen: Business School Press, 2. ed., 2002).

105 Stephen D. Krasner, "Planning and Garbage Cans: A Framework for Locating Policy Planning", in *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy*, ed. Daniel W. Drezner (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 159–71.

106 Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch, "What Do Policymakers Want From Us? Results of a Survey of Current and Former Senior National Security Decision Makers", *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2014): 227–46.

107 Peter M. Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination", *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 1–35.

108 David J. Griggs and T. S. Kestin, "Bridging the Gap between Climate Scientists and Decision Makers", *Climate Research* 47, no. 1–2 (2011): 139–44.

109 Peter M. Haas and Casey Stevens, "Organized Science, Usable Knowledge, and Multilateral Environmental Governance, in *Governing the Air: The Dynamics of Science, Policy, and Citizen Interaction*, ed. Rolf Lidskog and Göran Sundqvist (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 125–61.

110 "Transdisciplinary" refers not only to the interaction between several disciplines, but also between scientists and non-scientists.

111 Wolfram Mauser et al., "Transdisciplinary Global Change Research: The Co-creation of Knowledge for Sustainability", *Current opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 5, no. 3 (September 2013): 420–31; Armin Grunwald, "Transforma-

tive Wissenschaft — eine neue Ordnung im Wissenschaftsbetrieb?", *GAIA* 24, no. 1 (January 2015): 17–20.

112 Peter Strohschneider, "Zur Politik der Transformativen Wissenschaft", in *Die Verfassung des Politischen*, ed. André Brodocz et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2014), 175–92.

113 Sarah Cornell et al., "Opening up Knowledge Systems for Better Responses to Global Environmental Change", *Environmental Science & Policy* 28 (April 2013): 60–70.

tiations, but also to a politically difficult situation. The Ministerial Declaration negotiated at the UN's New York headquarters reflects the lines of conflict there. It is currently almost impossible to go beyond the agreed contents of the 2030 Agenda — it is enough of a struggle to preserve them. This relates, for example, to the sections on means of implementation, where debates between North and South are rekindled. Other contentious issues that have hampered consensus in recent years are women's rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and now also the multilateral trade and climate regime. Last but not least, the wording on the right to self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation has been an issue in every final plenary. In 2018, the US requested a recorded vote on the document as a whole — which meant that for the first time the Ministerial Declaration was not adopted by consensus, as the US and Israel voted against it. In her explanatory statement, the US representative criticised what she saw as the inappropriate politicisation of the agenda and floated the question of whether funds raised for the negotiations of the Ministerial Declaration would not be better used for the national implementation of the SDGs.[114]

The added value of the Ministerial Declaration is currently limited.

To summarise, the added value of the document is currently limited, since it only takes stock of trends and challenges and lists very general commitments. Moreover, the conflicts mean that, in the best case, agreed wording from older documents is merely repeated. In contrast, the *Summary* prepared by the ECOSOC President following the HLPF takes up the HLPF results and also presents recommendations from the meetings. However, there is only a weak mandate for this document;[115] it has therefore hardly any official political significance. Even the Ministerial Declaration has no direct or binding effect: since the HLPF has no decision-making powers of its own, the document goes via ECOSOC to the General Assembly. Nevertheless, pragmatists point out that it is impor-

tant to maintain a negotiated ministerial declaration so that high-ranking politicians come to New York. But they should then also be able to make forward-looking policy recommendations. As it stands, during the general debate, their microphone is turned off after a few minutes, and their contributions no longer influence the final document. Neither helps to increase their political interest in the HLPF. It remains to be seen to what extent this will be the case with the concise "Political Declaration", to be adopted by the Heads of State and Government at the HLPF in September 2019 under the auspices of the General Assembly. Also relevant in this context: for the eight-day HLPF to be held in July 2019, no Ministerial Declaration is to be negotiated, meaning that it is currently completely open how the results of this meeting will be documented.

Ultimately, this is where the basic conflict over the importance of the HLPF resurges, which already burdened the negotiations on its mandate in 2012 — 2013: should the HLPF merely be a "platform" for non-binding intergovernmental exchange, at the end of which a negotiated document is adopted by consensus (this is the position of the Russian Federation, among others), or should it be a high-level forum (with universal membership) that takes relevant decisions on the future course of action?

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114   See press release https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ecosoc6943.doc.htm (accessed 10 August 2018).

115   See the first footnote of the President's Summary of the 2018 HLPF, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/205432018_HLPF_Presidents_summary_FINAL.pdf (accessed 10 August 2018).

Looking Ahead: Pro-Actively Shaping UN Reforms

General Recommendations for the HLPF Review 2019–20

The HLPF was established in 2013, two years before the 2030 Agenda was adopted. As a result, its working methods and practices cannot match the level of ambition of the 2030 Agenda. As early as 2016, UN member states had decided to review the "format and organizational aspects" of the HLPF at the 74th session of the General Assembly, "in order to benefit from lessons learned in the first cycle of the forum".[116] In general, member states must decide whether they want to *expand* the currently overloaded HLPF (for example with more days for meetings) or *streamline* its mandate. Unfortunately, member states tend to want ever more with (even) fewer resources. Ultimately, this leaves everyone dissatisfied. The HLPF can only gain political significance if it is mandated to take *relevant decisions* and give *policy guidance*. Only then will high-ranking politicians develop an interest in participating. For this, the format of the two-day HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly must likewise be reconsidered. It would be important to prepare the outcome document of that summit — the mandated "Political Declaration" — in such a way as to provide effective political guidance for the further implementation of the 2030 agenda.

Concrete reform ideas have already been presented on important HLPF building blocks — the Thematic and SDG Reviews, VNRs, and the participation of non-governmental actors and scientists. From the outset, there was a consensus that the HLPF should not duplicate existing multilateral processes on the topics of individual SDGs. Instead, the forum should build on them, foregrounding the principles of the 2030 Agenda (transformation, integration, inclusiveness). For this to succeed, data, trends and policies from relevant sectoral processes must be evaluated and analysed sufficiently *early in the run-up* to the HLPF. This would at least provide a basis (although not a guarantee) for high-level representatives of the Member States to discuss policy recommendations during the HLPF and, at best, also mandate and resource their implementation.

"Reports" are not "reviews" – the latter require evaluation and analysis.

In the empirical analysis of the HLPF's current working methods and practices, it became clear that it is precisely these *preparatory and follow-up processes* that are lacking. Relevant reports must be available significantly earlier in the year so that they can be taken up by the delegates before negotiations on the HLPF Ministerial Declaration begin. "Reports" are not "reviews" — the latter require evaluation and analysis. More time and resources are needed for that. Here, it is helpful that the latest resolution on the ECOSOC review has called on the UN Secretariat to adjust the ECOSOC calendar and the reporting arrangements of its subsidiary bodies.[117] UNDESA's capacity must also be strengthened so that incoming reports can be better synthesised and results communicated more effectively. Especially when preparing the Thematic and SDG Reviews, the UN system's intensive cooperation from the Post-2015 negotiations should be continued. The same applies to consultations with non-state actors. The preparatory processes and their results should be communicated more intensively and transparently to the outside world. Moreover, the national teams preparing the HLPF should be strengthened. They should also be involved more in negotiating the Ministerial Declaration. It is not helpful if only representatives from the New York UN

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116 UNGA, *Follow-up and Review* (see note 61), para. 21.

117 UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 68/1* (see note 93), para. 31.

missions negotiate, because then the usual conflicts tend to dominate.

The drafting of the HLPF's programme could be supported by an "Advisory Programme Committee" that for example could assist the search for suitable panellists. The moderators of the HLPF panels should insist that invited panellists take note of all relevant reports to the HLPF and formulate policy-relevant recommendations based on them (rather than merely represent their own topics and interests). These recommendations should be based on the overarching principles of the 2030 Agenda.

Beyond that, member states could also decide to hold a one-week preparatory meeting in late May.[118] By then, the Secretary-General's SDG report, the reports from the UN system, the synthesis reports for the SDG reviews, and VNR reports (or at least the so-called "main messages") should be available. Such an *HLPF Spring Meeting* could then hold the Thematic and SDG reviews. Results could feed into the negotiations on the Ministerial Declaration in June, which on this basis could and should contain more substantial recommendations. In July, these recommendations should be discussed at ministerial level during the three-day high-level segment of the HLPF. To make more time for this, the VNRs that are not presented by heads of state and government or ministers could be moved to the other HLPF days.

To summarise, member states should mandate and enable the UN to organise processes *earlier and more transparent, integrated and analytical* when it comes to the preparation and then follow up of the HLPF's building blocks and corresponding results. If member states cannot bring themselves to relieve the Secretariat and the ECOSOC agenda by giving up historically outdated mandates, then they will have to make new additional resources available for this. Finally, it should also be transparent how the results of the HLPF are subsequently implemented.

Building the Political Will for Reform

The existing political momentum for an ambitious reform of the HLPF should be further expanded.

António Guterres had already presented his reform programme to the General Assembly as part of his application as UN Secretary-General. Inter alia, he advocates a new management paradigm: responsibility is to be decentralised, overlaps reduced, and processes designed more efficiently.[119] As the plans become more concrete, conflicts of interest have emerged, but the legitimacy of these administrative reforms remains high.[120] It would therefore be wise to consider how the reforms of the HLPF fit in with further UN reform processes.

With regard to the HLPF, the *ECOSOC Review* is of particular importance. In 2013, the General Assembly adopted reforms to the functioning of the Economic and Social Council.[121] Since then, the cycle of ECOSOC meetings has been running from July to July. Since 2016, the annual topics of ECOSOC and HLPF have been coordinated with reference to the 2030 Agenda. Since 2017, the last day of the ECOSOC High Level Segment has been directly connected to the HLPF and was used for the first time in 2018 to discuss trends and scenarios. In July 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on further reforms.[122] From now on, the one-day Integration Segment of ECOSOC will be held directly before the HLPF to process the input from member states, the UN system, and other relevant stakeholders; develop action-oriented recommendations for follow-up and feed into the ensuing HLPF. How this is to be achieved within the framework of a single day is unclear. However, it will be tested in 2019 and then reviewed at the 74th session of the General Assembly as part of the broader review of Council segments and meetings, along with the format of the HLPF.

The reforms of *UNDESA*, demanded by the member states in 2016 and started in spring 2018, have also brought innovations for the HLPF.[123] The secretariat functions for the HLPF are now shared between the newly named Office of Intergovernmental Support

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119 UNGA, *Shifting the Management Paradigm in the United Nations* (A/72/492) (New York: UN, September 2017). This document is mainly about internal administrative procedures rather than political decision-making processes.
120 Beate Wagner, "António Guterres — Ein Jahr im Amt", in: *Vereinte Nationen* 66, no. 1 (2018): 26−30.
121 UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 61/16 on the Strengthening of the Economic and Social Council* (A/RES/68/1) (New York: UN, 20 September 2013).
122 UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 68/1* (see note 93), para 11.
123 See UNGA, *Follow-up and Review* (see note 61), para. 16.

118 To avoid the usual dispute over the number of meeting days, the preparatory week could use three days of the HLPF, plus one day each of the ECOSOC *Integration Segment* and the *Development Cooperation Forum*. The HLPF in July would then comprise only five days instead of eight.

and Coordination for Sustainable Development (formerly ECOSOC Support Office) and the Division for Sustainable Development Goals, which has also been renamed (earlier DSD). The former focuses on intergovernmental processes, including the HLPF, while the latter takes over the substantive support and capacity building to the SDGs, including responsibility for the GSDR and SDG partnerships. It is to be hoped that this reform will help to improve the cooperative support for the HLPF.

In the context of the debate on *Revitalising the General Assembly*, discussions include how the agendas of the General Assembly, ECOSOC and HLPF can be better coordinated and linked to the 2030 Agenda.[124] Unnecessary duplication and overlap shall also be addressed. In the literature, strengthening the General Assembly is seen as a good means for overcoming potential blockages in the Security Council or in the ECOSOC through majority-decisions.[125]

It is essential, to press ahead with the preparations for the HLPF Summit.

A test for this could be the two-day HLPF, which will take place on 24/25 September 2019 at the level of heads of state and government under the auspices of the General Assembly. To achieve a substantial result beyond the lowest common denominator, it is essential to press ahead with the preparations for this Summit. In the "Political Declaration" to be negotiated there, member states should also give a clear impetus to the reforms needed to make the HLPF "fit for purpose".

The reform of the *UN Development System* (UNDS), which has already been decided and is now being implemented, should help the UN to work on the SDGs more effectively.[126] In 2017, the Secretary-General published two reports containing reform proposals.[127] In late May 2018, member states agreed on a resolution that largely supports Guterres's reform proposals, albeit with reservations and conditions.[128] The reforms are primarily aimed at more efficient UN structures and processes at national and regional level. Specifically, the UN Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams are to be strengthened and their funding stabilised. However, experts rightly consider this reform as "unfinished business" — many questions will still need to be answered during implementation.[129] This includes better coordination between the UNDS and the HLPF.

As part of the *Sustaining Peace* debate,[130] member states and experts have been discussing the links between peace and development for some time, initially under the heading "Human Security", now as the "Development-Humanitarian-Peacebuilding Nexus". In addition to reforming the peace and security architecture, the UN Secretary-General wants to extend institutional responsibility for conflict *prevention* to the *entire* UN system. In this context, priority will be given to expanding capacities of UN entities working at the national and local level. As regards the HLPF, the Russian Federation has expressed concerns over efforts to deal with security-related issues in this forum, claiming such issues were the Security Council's responsibility. Russia also rejects any interference in internal affairs under the banner of prevention, as well as a corresponding extension of the powers of the UN Secretariat. These conflicts are likely to arise again in the work on SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) scheduled for 2019.

124 See https://www.un.org/pga/72/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/07/Alignment-signed-letter-dated-18-July-2018.pdf (accessed 16 August 2018).

125 Engelhardt, *Weltgemeinschaft am Abgrund* (see note 19).

126 This has already been a long process: from 2014 as the *Dialogue on the longer-term positioning of the UN development system* and since 2106 in the context of the *Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of operational activities for development of the UN system* (QCPR), including the report by the Independent Team of Advisors (ITA), *Findings and Conclusions. The Future We Want — The United Nations We Need*, 16 June 2016, http://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/qcpr/ita-findings-and-conclusions-16-jun-2016.pdf. See also Stephen

Browne, *Sustainable Development Goals and UN Goal-Setting* (London: Routledge, 2017).

127 UNGA/ECOSOC, *Repositioning the UN Development System to Deliver on the 2030 Agenda. Report of the Secretary-General* (A/72/124 — E/2018/3) (New York, 11 July 2017); UNGA/ECOSOC, *Repositioning the UN Development System to Deliver on the 2030 Agenda. Report of the Secretary-General* (A/72/684-E/2018/7) (New York, 21 December 2017).

128 UNGA, *Repositioning of the United Nations Development System in the Context of the QCPR* (A/RES/72/279) (New York, 1 June 2018).

129 Max Baumann and Silke Weinlich, *Unfinished Business: An Appraisal of the Latest UNDS Reform Resolution*, Briefing Paper 13/2018 (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2018).

130 Cedric de Coning, *Sustaining Peace. Can a New Approach Change the UN?*, Global Governance Spotlight 3/2018 (Bonn: Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden, April 2018).
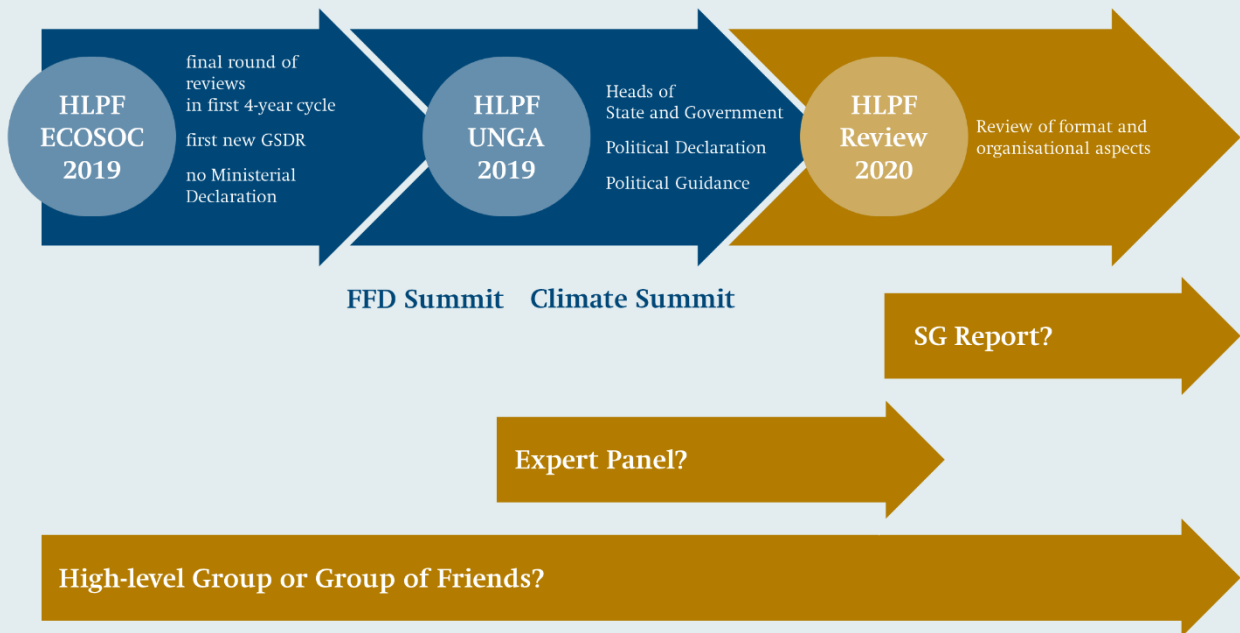
Chart 2

Towards the HLPF Review: Proposal for a Preparatory Process

HLPF ECOSOC 2019 — final round of reviews in first 4-year cycle / first new GSDR / no Ministerial Declaration

HLPF UNGA 2019 — Heads of State and Government / Political Declaration / Political Guidance

HLPF Review 2020 — Review of format and organisational aspects

FFD Summit   Climate Summit

SG Report?

Expert Panel?

High-level Group or Group of Friends?

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Taken together, the outcome of these reform debates will influence how ambitious the reforms of the HLPF can be. Status quo interests and potential blockades should be analysed and taken into account. In particular, the reservations of the Russian Federation (among others) and also the conflict between the US and the Group of 77 and China (which in 2019 will be presided by Palestine) will weigh on reform efforts. Elections have also been held in many countries since 2015, and perhaps not all new governments share the previous government's support for the 2030 Agenda and SDGs.

At the same time, these reform processes create a momentum that interested member states should use to tackle the HLPF Review, planned for 2019−20, with real commitment. The experience of the negotiations on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda shows how important *leadership* and *ownership* are for successful negotiations. In February 2018, in its coalition agreement, the new German government stated twice that "the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the promotion of sustainable development" is the "benchmark

for government action".[131] It planned to strengthen the United Nations and would also increase funds and orientate them more strategically. In this spirit, the Federal Government, together with Sweden, could revitalise the 2015 "High-Level Group" in support of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, together with other heads of state and government, or alternatively found a new group of friends. In Europe, interested parties might include the Nordic countries (especially Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway), France (VNR and G7 Presidency in 2019), the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. International partners could be Colombia (as initiator of the SDGs), Ecuador (Presidency of the 73rd General Assembly), Republic of Korea (Co-Chair Friends of Governance for Sustainable Development), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (ECOSOC Presidency), and other small island developing states (SIDS).

Such a group could try to convince the General Assembly to call on the Secretary-General to present a report no later than early 2020 setting out options for HLPF reform based on the experience of the first four-

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131 See https://www.cdu.de/koalitionsvertrag-2018 (accessed 5 July 2018), 137, 144f., 160.

year cycle (see Chart 2). To prepare for this, the Group could provide resources with the help of which the Secretary-General could appoint a small expert panel to develop options for reforms, consult widely with member states and stakeholders on this, and present results in autumn 2019. A first interim report from the expert panel could already inform the negotiations on the Political Declaration for the HLPF Summit of Heads of State and Government in September 2019. Intergovernmental negotiations could begin in spring 2020, and the agreed reforms could be adopted at the latest in the context of the 75th anniversary of the UN.

The German government should pro-actively support efforts to make the HLPF an effective key institution in the UN system. With this commitment it could make it clear that it continues to uphold effective multilateralism and sustainable development as guiding principles of its foreign policy.

Abbreviations

CEB	Chief Executives Board (UN)
DFG	German Research Foundation
ECESA	Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs (UN)
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council (UN)
FFD	Financing for Development
GSDR	Global Sustainable Development Report
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (UN)
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MGoS	Major Groups and other Stakeholders
MICs	Middle-Income Countries
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QCPR	Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDS	United Nations Development System
UNECE	United Nationals Economic Commission for Europe
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNOP	United Nations Office for Partnerships
VNR	Voluntary National Review