

The HLPF We Need to Support the 2030 Agenda

Günther Bachmann
German Council for Sustainable Development

Key note to the 2018 Sustainable Development Transition Forum: Accelerating Progress towards the SDGs: Enhancing the Role of the High-Level Political Forum

Hosted by the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD) of UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Division for Sustainable Development Goals, in partnership with the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)

29–31 October 2018, Incheon Songdo, Incheon, Republic of Korea

I thank you for this invitation. This meeting comes timely. Because we do not yet have the HLPF (UN High Level Political Forum) we need. But we may be able to add impactful features. To do so, decisions must be taken right now in order to ensure a meaningful and ambitious preparation of the two 2019 HLPF sessions, taking into account as well the 2020 ECOSOC reform and the UN's 70th anniversary, which will also take place in 2020.

Addressing the Transition Forum 2018 is a privilege. I still remember very well the heartfelt appreciation expressed in reply to my think piece on SDG number 18.¹ Please, once again, be reminded that I am speaking on behalf of the German Council for Sustainable Development, the national advisory body reporting to the German government. Thus, for our recommendation on the multilateral dimension of the 2030 Agenda and on the HLPF in particular,² our prime addressee is Ms Merkel, the Germany Chancellor.

¹ Bachmann, Guenther (2016): The 18th SDG. Sustainable Development in a Changing World: A Changing Perspective on Sustainability. Think piece presented at the UNOSD's Sustainable Development Transition Forum, SDTF, Incheon, PRC, 2016

² Steering global sustainability away from a dead end. The RNE's recommendations to the German federal government for enhancing multilateralism for the 2030 Agenda; https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RNE_statement_HLPF_Governance.pdf

I

I will make two points today. The first is on mindset or attitudes, the second on momentum and action.

However, before I go into the matter itself, please allow me to make a personal remark on the state of democracy and social progress. I just received word from Alessandra Nilo, speaking on behalf of Gestos and of the organised civil society in Brazil. During the recent election campaign in Brazil she experienced threats and in her email she now expresses that she fears imprisonment or being driven into exile once the far right, even (in her words) fascist candidate wins the election – which he did yesterday evening. I think I should make this known to all gathered here. Democracy and social progress, SDGs 16 and 17, are under at-tack. This attack is a menace to the public and to us all, at universities, in the streets, in ad-ministrations, in politics, in enterprises. We are all concerned.

That brings me to my first point on mindset.

Let us be honest: we are currently heading toward a five-degrees world. That would turn almost everything upside down. We also have to be honest that many people have lost their trust in conventional politics and the vision of the future these are presenting: as in long-term thinking and sustainable development. There is uncertainty as to what this is all about, even among experts. In addition, we see in many countries a growing disconnect between politics and the expectations of the people. People feel they are being left out by what they perceive as a global elite that talks about the future and hops from conference to conference without any accountability for what happens on the ground. I do not accept all these arguments, but I think the fact that such criticisms surface should be taken seriously.

Uncertainty is always a precursor to change as upheaval or fear often precede transformation. We know this from history. That, in itself, comes as no surprise. But reality reacts in different ways: more reflection and management or more resignation.

II

So, when assessing the HLPF,³ the overall mindset is key. Are we going to join the uncertainty party telling everybody that the HLPF is boring, that the VNRs are window dressing, their presentation akin to a beauty contest, that it lacks credible results, that it is just another talk shop.

All this is true. But instead of only talking about its shortcomings I suggest an attitude that would complete the view.

³ The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) has been in existence since 2012 and is tasked with monitoring and reviewing the 2030 Agenda as well as action taken at national level. It replaces the Commission on Sustainable Development. The HLPF convenes under the auspices of the UN's ECOSOC. Back in 2015, no decision was taken to add a transformational Council for Sustainable Development or regulatory instruments to the UN Charter. As a "forum" HLPF has no far-reaching resolution rights. It is informed by the reports of the UN Secretary-General and the Statistical Commission and by the scientific four-year progress report (Global Sustainable Development Report, GSDR), the report of the Forum on Financing for Development, the regional forums, the thematic reviews and the voluntary national reviews (VNRs).

Based on prior history, the HLPF is a success. It is the institutional home to the 2030 Agenda. It displays a positive dynamic. The growing number of country reports hints at an increasing number of people engaged in implementing the SDGs. The HLPF is emerging as a hub for networking. The quality of reports and reviews varies, yet the good, ambitious ones give hope of more. Mutuality, multilateral cooperation and transition governance are navigating uncharted waters. It's no wonder, the governance approach is "in the making". The HLPF could be seen as an initial step into a new policy style.

Thus, I think, overall we are not doing badly. The establishment of the 2030 Agenda marks a valuable and important achievement in our collective effort to keep the planet in balance. The 2030 Agenda is the political alternative to the current betting on aggressive nationalism. Its universality focuses on adapted national accountability and action as well as on international rules, peace and partnerships.

If we look back all the way to 1987 (Brundtland) and 1992 (Rio), we can see that the notion of sustainable development has been kept on the highest political agenda ever since. Where-as the notions of globalisation and neo-liberalism have faded away. So, what I am saying is that in terms of public policies – not economically, not in terms of cash flow – the sustainability community is stronger than is often perceived within the community.

III

This is the backdrop against which we may tackle the shortcomings. Bringing me to my second point on momentum and action.

I now refer to the recommendation on advancing the multilateral dimension of the 2030 Agenda and the HLPF in particular. The German Council for Sustainable Development presented this recommendation in September. We had been encouraged by the Peer Review⁴ from Helen Clark and ten international experts, commissioned by our Chancellor and facilitated by the Council's office. Two gentlemen present here in the audience were Peers and contributed their views to the Peer Review. I would like to thank once again Adolfo Ayuso-Audry, of the Office of the Mexican Presidency, and Jan-Gustav Strandenaes, from the Stakeholder Forum Norway.

The Council recommends providing fresh views and a political wake-up call through a "Makers Panel". We advocate establishing this panel as a wake-up call driving for the momentum of managing change from 2018 to 2020. We are fully aware of the UN's commissions fatigue.

What we propose differs significantly from what the fate of so many of the usual commissions that, we agree, are mostly harmless or even not to the point. The maker's panel should be characterised by authentically embodying practitioners or makers' expertise. That means primarily that

⁴ "Change – Opportunity – Urgency: The Benefit of Acting Sustainably. The 2018 Peer Review on the German Sustainability Strategy; Report by the International Peer Group chaired by Helen Clark Berlin", May 2018, cf. https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018_Peer_Review_of_German_Sustainability_Strategy_BITV.pdf; presented by the German Government to the HLPF 2018, with contributions by Helen Clark as Chair and Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul as member of the German Council for Sustainable Development

panellists should be young enough that they must realise the SDGs over the course of their working lives or political commitments up to 2030. Accountability is a key. They will stand for a political culture and practise that communicates and implements the SDGs in the “real world”; naturally, the panel’s composition should be balanced in terms of gender and global regions as well and feature representatives of the major groups.

I am happy to tell you that the German government will be officially suggesting the panel concept to the UN Deputy Secretary-General, complete with a financial package for implementation.

The rationale behind our idea is as follows: if the HLPF is to have any major leverage, it has to come from the national level, in line with the “DNA” of the SDGs themselves as it is the national level where the SDGs are to be implemented.

IV

There are also additional recommendations with high political significance:

- We suggest developing a platform for partnerships. In particular “coalitions of early achievers” should commit to realising sub-targets to the 2030 Agenda long before 2030.
- We suggest bringing the finance sector in and to use the momentum of “sustainable finance”. We would like to see the 2030 Agenda as a European project reaching out to Africa.
- As the VNRs vary greatly in quality we suggest coming up with guidelines regarding materiality and process, informal minimum requirements and mutual learning groups.
- We assume that turning the HLPF into a global sustainability council is currently not on the UN’s agenda. Nonetheless, we recommend that this option not be completely abandoned. More investment in the UN system and its reform is urgently needed.
- The stakeholder groups’ procedural rights should be expanded.
- Referring to the HLPF’s internal work processes we ask for more interaction and dialogue during the VNR presentation.
- Reporting sessions should be made more interactive and need more space for discussions.
- Workflows must ensure that the documents are made available much earlier than is currently the case.
- Thematic reviews must look systematically at the interdependency of the SDGs.
- The VNRs should state what multilateral support they believe is necessary and desirable, and what connections they see with the thematic reviews.

- We suggest adjusting the institutional dynamics between HLPF and ECOSOC. Participation of non-state actors is inadequate, as of now. A fundamental institutional reform is not in sight for the time being. Still, in terms of organizing work processes, there is considerable scope for improving the coordination between the ECOSOC and the HLPF.

For Germany, we would like to see a national HLPF prep conference. That would be instrumental for more significant resonance of sustainability policies. We also advocate using more national peer reviews. I would like to make the point that for any country in the world, the significance of HLPF processes increases 1:1 if and insofar there is a profound and informed debate on the country level because it is there where the ownership for the SDGs lies

V

Having now laid out the rationale and content of our plan to empower the HLPF, I would like for you to keep in mind that oppression and deterioration are no match for compassion. That we can silence the shouts of the fanatics and bullies of the world and in our respective nations if we unify voices of decency and ambition, empathy, compassion and tolerance. Combining creativity and empathy enlightens our future.