

Architecture for review and follow-up of the SDGs: Options for the High-Level Political Forum

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A brief summary of the architecture

The HLPF review process described in Part II of this paper could have three components:

- A. An inclusive conversation at national level every five years, led by governments with wide participation, on the progress being made towards the SDGs and on the Means of Implementation. Countries will differ in which goals matter, and where they put the emphasis in each cycle. The process could be launched with reports from international organizations, the government, and stakeholders. After a participatory discussion, the government might prepare a synthesis report on the country's achievements and on what needs to be done to achieve its goals. This government report would be the basis for review at the regional and global levels.
- B. Aggregation and peer review at regional level, creating a conversation among countries in similar circumstances allowing for learning about successes and difficulties. The Summit could invite selected regional platforms to consult on how their existing mechanisms could be used for this purpose. Criteria for selecting bodies must apply to countries at all stages of development.
- C. Global assessment of progress towards sustainable development, drawing lessons from the national reviews and reviews of UN entities, allowing for a review on how the system is working, and mid-course adjustments to the review process. It might have two tracks:
 1. National review. We see three options
 - a. Reports from regional bodies on the national synthesis reports, perhaps with an overview prepared by UN DESA drawing out common themes and cross-region comparisons'
 - b. Working-level review of all of that year's national reports during the HLPF; and/or
 - c. Ministerial presentation of selected national reports representing all of the UN geographic regions.
 2. Thematic discussion. This aspect of the HLPF might focus each year on a cluster of goals and targets, which might become the annual ECOSOC theme. It would include a review of UN entities and of the annual report on Financing for Development

Note:

- HLPF every year at the level of ministers will produce "a negotiated ministerial declaration" for inclusion in the ECOSOC report to the General Assembly.
- HLPF every four years at the level of Heads of State and Government will produce "a concise negotiated political declaration to be submitted for the consideration of the Assembly."
- Both create the opportunity for a political statement at the highest levels on the overall assessment of progress towards sustainable development.

Organizational issues

- This architecture implies an ambitious agenda for the HLPF. Members might consider whether the eight-day meeting requires a preparatory process, which might include a "friends of the chair" group working in consultation with the ECOSOC Bureau.

Introduction

Mechanisms for reviewing progress will be essential to the interconnected challenges of achieving the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We are all in the same boat, and we must all move forward together, if not at the same pace. Follow up mechanisms will enable the world to understand how things are working so that program adjustments can be made. Review will also allow states to learn from the experience of others; and review will shed light on whether all states are individually and collectively on track to meet their objectives. Most of the needed action on sustainable development is national, even local. In this sense the new paradigm is bottom-up not top-down. Global as well as national review will be needed, however, because what happens in one part of the world has effects in others. Global review is also needed because countries in different regions or at the same level of development may face similar challenges and hence have lessons to share. This new global partnership for sustainable development, with its universal mandate, represents a new paradigm, and the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is the place where it can be articulated and enhanced through its review mechanism.

Reviews are useful if they contribute to an understanding by individual governments of how they are doing, and to collective understanding of how the system is doing. Review mechanisms commend themselves neither on their technical merits nor their democratic virtue but because of the purposes they serve both for those reviewing and for those being reviewed. Participants in the process have to see the benefit for themselves, otherwise review cannot work. While the goals are universal, recognition of national circumstances and priorities is essential for the review process. The purpose of review mechanisms is thus to allow consideration of whether national law, policy, and implementation are consistent with each state's aspirations for achieving the SDGs.

The HLPF was established in 2012 (A/RES/66/288 "The future we want") as a replacement for the Commission on Sustainable Development. In 2013 the General Assembly decided (A/RES/67/290) that the HLPF should conduct regular reviews, starting in 2016, on the follow-up and implementation of sustainable development commitments and objectives, including those related to the means of implementation, within the context of the post-2015 development agenda. The GA resolution envisages two different configurations for the HLPF. The first, in paragraph 6, will involve Heads of State or Government every four years (under GA auspices). The second, in paragraph 7, will be an annual eight-day session including a three-day ministerial segment (under the auspices of ECOSOC). The HLPF will play the central role in orchestrating the review and follow-up of the SDGs, but it cannot do the whole job itself, in eight days per year. We agree with those observers who think that the HLPF can only succeed in meeting its significant responsibilities by orchestrating the efforts of states, UN entities, business, NGOs, and stakeholders to achieve the SDGs. Orchestration depends on providing incentives and a framework for everyone to participate. Both states and UN entities face multiple and conflicting reviews. The HLPF process is not intended to add to this burden, but it could bring clarity and coherence to this great enterprise.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss options for the architecture for review and follow-up of the SDGs in the context of the HLPF, without considering all the detail of who does what or how to incorporate all the organizations that will be involved. We discuss the institutional design principles for review mechanisms, in the first section, and then in the second section we describe how we see the design choices in a way that may be helpful for negotiators preparing for the May 2015 Session on Monitoring & Review of the Post-2015 Intergovernmental Negotiations.

Part I: Principles for thinking about the HLPF review mechanism

We have previously developed an analytic framework based on six questions to be asked in any analysis of a review mechanism.¹ Asking these questions with respect to the HLPF helps us to be sure that we have systematically considered all the salient factors. We will pose them in general, in this section, and then with respect to each aspect of the architecture, in the second section. The questions are:

1. Who is being reviewed;
2. By whom;
3. about what are they being reviewed;
4. through what processes the review is to be conducted;
5. by what standards the relevant policies and practices are to be assessed; and,
6. what are the potential effects of the review.

We take these questions in order.

I.1 Who is to be reviewed?

The resolution creating the HLPF, consistent with the universal nature of the proposed SDGs, specifies that developed countries, developing countries, and relevant UN entities would be reviewed. It remains to be clarified whether the HLPF would review all of the [~52] UN entities, or only bodies most relevant to sustainable development. Would the review include entities in the wider intergovernmental network (e.g., the World Bank, IMF, WTO), and regional intergovernmental bodies? Would this review be linked to the reviews by their own boards? How does the review of UN entities relate to the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR)?

I.2 By whom?

Will the HLPF focus on review by governments of the actions of other governments, which we would call horizontal review? Or will the focus also include review of state action by stakeholders and other groups, which we would call vertical review? Review of sustainable development requires the engagement of all of society, while respecting the constitutional obligations of governments. Horizontal and vertical review mechanisms will nevertheless be in tension, which will require careful institutional design.

I.3 About what?

The HLPF has a mandate to review “the follow-up and implementation of sustainable development commitments and objectives, including those related to the means of implementation”, and the reviews should replace the ECOSOC national voluntary presentations (67/290 para 8). This language seems to imply that states should be reviewed. Would the focus be on the SDGs? The process might recognize that universality does not preclude both a different emphasis in reviews by country or region, and alignment of reviews with a country’s other international obligations. National reviews under the HLPF might begin by asking whether governments have created national plans, or passed necessary legislation. The review mechanism must be conceived as a two-way street – reviewing both national efforts to meet goals and targets, and the track record of actors expected to assist with the means of implementation in the form of funding, capacity and technology.

¹ Previous IISD papers on review concepts as applied to the HLPF are available at <http://www.iisd.org/publications/building-effective-review-mechanism-lessons-hlpf> and <http://www.iisd.org/publications/options-hlpf-review-mechanism>.

In the case of UN entities, will they be reviewed on their contribution to achieving the SDGs, or to coherence within the UN system? The resolution also mentions that the HLPF will “follow up and review progress in the implementation of all the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and environmental fields.” Would such conferences and summits include the lengthy list in the Preamble? Should the HLPF focus on aggregating the aspects related to the SDGs from the regular reviews conducted by the intergovernmental bodies themselves? How can these reviews be combined and streamlined to avoid “review fatigue”? Should the HLPF review include a focus on how well entities complement one another in pursuing their objectives? The resolution adds that the HLPF shall “promote system-wide coherence and coordination of sustainable development policies.” Does it follow that the objective should be to ensure that the UN system functions as whole in supporting the achievement of the SDGs? Would the review of UN entities be closely related to the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR)?

I.4 Through what process?

The process for review is the central institutional design question for the HLPF. The question has two dimensions - data, and mechanisms. Given the many other groups working on the data needs for the SDGs and for FfD,² we note only that a consistent format for reporting will allow comparability among countries and regions, and systemic aggregation. Simple formats will minimize the burden for countries, and make it easier for civil society to understand reports.

We wonder if HLPF reporting should be compatible with reporting for other (sectoral) reviews—for example, using the same kind of data on water, energy, or food security used for reviews by FAO, UNEP, UNDP, IEA/IRENA and so on. Similarly, how can the HLPF leverage its own resources by drawing on the work of existing review mechanisms? It might be helpful to conduct a mapping exercise of all international organization review mechanisms that could be in a position to make a contribution. The resolution mentions the creation of a Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) but does not specify the relation with the HLPF reviews. Will the information base for HLPF reviews include material prepared for the GSDR? If as suggested by some experts, the GSDR is in part a regular analytic assessment of the many national and international assessments available every year, a “state of the world”, then the GSDR might be a valuable input to such reviews by the HLPF.

Turning now to mechanisms, they will differ depending on whether the intent is horizontal or vertical review. Horizontal mechanisms imply peer review by governments of other governments involving ministers and/or senior officials. Vertical mechanisms will be more complicated, requiring dissemination of draft reports, opportunity in good time to submit comments, and deliberative opportunities. In either case, the process of discussing reports can be the most valuable part of the process.

I.5 Criteria / standard of assessment?

The SDGs will be aspirational objectives, not legally “binding” obligations, and yet criteria for the review process are important. Will negotiators be able to say at the outset how progress towards sustainable development will be recognized, from the standpoints of governments and of people affected?

Choosing criteria for a review is also delicate because of the attribution problem. It is one thing to ask if a government’s actions are consistent with its responsibilities under the SDGs both at home and internationally, but it is something else to be able to make causal connections between an action and a desired outcome. A clear distinction needs to be made, therefore, between “effort” and “impact.” Government policies are necessarily focused on effort. If the commitment in question is about specified policies, then criteria focused on effort are sufficient. But if the point of the HLPF is to

² See paras 115-119 of the March Zero Draft of the Outcome Document of the Third Financing for Development Conference to be held in Addis Ababa (hereafter FfD zero draft).

consider sustainable development objectives, then some consideration of impact or outcomes seems essential. It will not be enough to review *what* has been done; it is also important to gauge what *impact* it has had, if any. The point of such monitoring in the HLPF, however, is not “evaluation”, given the attribution problem of knowing if a goal has been achieved, but assessment of progress as a way to facilitate learning.

I.6 With what effects on agents?

The desired effect of review and follow-up in the HLPF is to encourage movement towards sustainable development, and to ensure follow up on the SDGs including the means of implementation.

Review mechanisms work best where actors – whether states or international organizations – have a clear sense of how the review results will affect them. Voluntary participation is unlikely if the objective is sanction of some sort. The effects on states of review mechanisms sometimes include both social pressure and learning about appropriate action, both of which can lead to a change in policy, but learning is a bigger incentive than criticism. States change not because they fear the consequences of failure to comply, although they might wish to avoid embarrassment for reasons of national pride, but because they have learned about successful behavior. The effect ought to be to enhance the capacity to learn and adapt, with access to the means of implementation as an incentive.

I.7 When

Before considering the application of these principles, we note that a seventh question should also be asked: when should reviews take place, and how should time be considered? Constant review prevents anybody from getting anything done; but reviews only every ten years would be useless. Similarly, long lag times between decisions and their consequences create problems of assessment: when can we judge whether appropriate action has been taken, or has achieved its desired effects? *The Future We Want* (A/RES/66/288) begins with a commitment “to ensuring the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet and for present and future generations.” HLPF reviews must confront the uncertainty about whether decisions will have the desired consequences for sustainable development both now and in the future. We are reviewing ourselves, but the review must account for the concerns of generations as yet unborn.

Part II Design options

In this section we sketch the main elements of the architecture based on the principles developed in the previous section.

II.A National reviews

The resolution creating the HLPF is focused on the activities of the forum, but worthwhile discussion of national progress at global level must rest on a foundation of strong national reviews. While the process will differ according to each country's normal practices, it ought to be based on an extensive participatory process, and inclusive participatory review. The HLPF may have to find a way to encourage states to participate. For developing countries, such encouragement might require capacity support.

II.A.1 Who?

This question is more ambiguous than it first appears. It seems obvious that a national review would cover the efforts of the government, but should "who" go beyond the government to include the efforts of society as a whole? Does "who is to be reviewed" also include the role played by UN entities, and the contribution of donor governments, firms and NGOs to the means of implementation?

II.A.2 By whom?

The reviews ought to involve broad, multi-stakeholder participation, perhaps mediated through elected representatives, with local as well as national ownership.

II.A.3 About what?

The focus of national reviews could be on all the SDGs as reflected in the national policy framework for sustainable development. In this new bottom-up paradigm, each country could have a periodic national conversation on the priority to be given to each goal in its nationally-developed plan for achieving sustainable development. The HLPF can create a framework, but the elaboration will be national. The central questions for reviews, could be

- a) What has been accomplished?
- b) Is our sustainable development plan appropriate?
- c) How can we go further given our national circumstances?

The emphasis might vary between initial and later reviews.

The resolution requires that reviews consider the means of implementation; that would seem to include different combinations of public and private financing, trade, technology, innovation, and capacity building, depending on the goal, underpinned by effective institutions and sound policies (see para 16 of the FfD zero draft). This part of the national review could be based both on a self-assessment of resources mobilized to implement a goal, and assessments by relevant international organizations of whether the country is either a) receiving appropriate support from donors, in the case of developing countries, or b) making an appropriate contribution to the efforts of developing countries, in the case of donors.

II.A.4 Through what process?

We agree with suggestions that the process ought to be participatory, broadly accessible, but state-led, including open consultations at local level, building to national parliamentary hearings, or the equivalent existing mechanisms.

The process national review process might begin with reports based on globally-harmonized formats designed by the HLPF. We see the possibility of four reports:

1. A report compiling existing information and data from UN agencies, IFIs, and other bodies;
2. A government report;
3. A national stakeholder report; and later
4. A report prepared by the government on the results of the review noting necessary follow-up. This report would go to the regional level, and could also go to the HLPF.

While conducting the national review is of course voluntary for states, our assumption is that the preparation of the international organization reports, and the stakeholder reports, would in turn trigger the government reports.

II.A.5 Standards of assessment?

In line with the principles in Part I, the HLPF may need to reflect on the criteria that countries ought to consider: how can countries decide if they are doing enough to achieve the SDGs? This guidance from the UN could then inform the national conversation on the standard of review that a given country wishes to apply to itself.

II.A.6 With what potential effects?

The first effect of the HLPF review is learning by governments and stakeholders, which could encourage renewed effort towards sustainable development. The second effect could be follow-up directed to needed policy change and the means of implementation.

II.A.7 When?

The approach to this question involves trade-offs between more rigorous reviews that might be costly and time-consuming, and lighter reviews that may be less onerous but also less useful. Or a trade-off between more frequent reviews implying considerable engagement of funds and capacity, or less frequent, with the risk that the long time lapse between reviews might adversely affect progress towards the SDGs. The resolution simply says that the reviews shall be “regular”; if countries are on a five year cycle, which seems reasonable, that would imply conducting up to 40 national reviews per year in the HLPF.

II.B Regional peer review

The GA decided that the HLPF “shall benefit from regional preparatory processes” (67/290 para 7 f)) and invited “the United Nations regional commissions to contribute to the work of the forum, including through annual regional meetings, with the involvement of other relevant regional entities, major groups and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate” (67/290 para 13). Such regional preparation might be especially helpful in aggregating and analyzing national reviews, using existing strengths in regional bodies.

II.B.1 Who?

The regional reviews seem likely to be horizontal, largely involving states.

II.B.2 By whom?

Regional peer review could be conducted by the member states of regional bodies, ensuring that the “peers” are in fact similar states, although not every regional platform has a peer review process now. Some countries, or some regions, may wish to include countries from outside the region in the process. In inviting regional platforms to consider how they can best contribute to the process, the HLPF may note that while engagement with stakeholders is important, each body will have its own practices for the involvement of non-state actors in peer review.

II.B.3 About what?

Questions that could be asked at regional level include: What have countries done to achieve all of the SDGs? Are there regional trends, obstacles, commonalities, best practices and lessons to be learned? What national successes should be noted, and where is future action needed? We note with respect to the means of implementation that the FfD zero draft (para 122) recognizes the importance of peer learning and includes a call for follow-up on the Accord at the regional level.

II.B.4 Through what process?

The input could be national synthesis reports prepared by governments on the basis of their national review, and presented by ministers. Regional bodies may be invited to prepare an aggregated report for the HLPF on the results of their peer review of the national reports, and on any other matters relevant to the SDGs at regional level. Consistent with their usual practices, regional bodies could publish the inputs and outputs from their peer reviews.

Criteria for selecting regional bodies to be part of the HLPF review process must apply to countries at all stages of development. We note that the Regional Commissions’ New York Office recommends:

- Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), supplemented by ASEAN, ESCAP, ADB, PIF etc
- African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)
- ECLAC
- Arab Forum on Sustainable Development (AFSD)
- UNECE (including the Environmental Performance Reviews) and/or peer review in various OECD bodies, including but not limited to the Development Assistance Committee.

II.B.5 Standards of assessment?

Criteria for national reviews at regional level could be similar to criteria suggested in II. A.5 for the national level, having regard to the standard the country set for itself, and the regional bodies own usual standards for peer review.

II.B.6 With what potential effects?

The value of peer review is learning from the experience of other similar countries. Aggregation for HLPF of lessons learned and of the needs for the means of implementation could help with follow-up.

II.B.7 When?

Regional bodies could be invited to report annually on the year's peer reviews.

II.C Global level

The review mechanism in the HLPF could have two tracks, national and thematic.

II.C.1 National reviews in the HLPF

The GA resolution (67/290 para 8) requires the HLPF to conduct voluntary state-led national reviews, which will replace the AMR beginning in 2016.

II.C.1.1 Who?

States

II.C.1.2 By whom?

Participants in the HLPF. (see para 14 of 67/290)

II.C.1.3 About what?

Chart global progress on the sustainable development framework based on a review of national reviews; and lessons learned in implementation of the SDGs.

II.C.1.4 Through what process?

Designing the process for this part of the HLPF review mechanism may be the most difficult decision facing negotiators. It seems obvious to us that the time allotted for the HLPF will be insufficient to discuss 40 national reviews each year in any significant way, assuming that such reviews are on a five-year cycle, and yet if the objective of the review mechanism is also to support and improve implementation it is imperative that capitals be involved. We see three options for the national reviews, which are not mutually exclusive:

- a) Discussion of reports from regional bodies on national reports, perhaps with a synthesis prepared by UN DESA drawing out common themes and cross-region comparisons, possibly on the annual theme (see section II.C.2 below).
- b) Parallel working-level review (during the five day preparatory phase?) of all of that year's national reports. (We understand that the Universal Periodic Review requires three sessions of two weeks each every year to review 42 national reports.)
- c) Ministerial presentation (over one or two of the three ministerial days?) of selected national reports representing all of the UN geographic regions. Participation would be voluntary.

II.C.1.5 Standard of assessment?

Among the questions the HLPF could ask are:

- Are national reviews addressing the right questions and issues?
- Do countries at varying levels of development have access to sufficient resources to do the reports?
- Do international organizations play a helpful role in generating data or doing analysis?
- Are the means of implementation adequate?
- What general lessons emerge from the regional reviews?
- Should the national review process be modified?

II.C.1.6 With what potential effects?

Identify challenges and bottlenecks, and mobilize action to address them.

II.C.1.7 When

The annual schedule for the 40 national reports to be prepared by UN entities (II.A.4 above) could be determined in advance by the HLPF, which in turn would set the schedule for each year's reviews in the forum.

II.C.2 HLPF Thematic reviews

The Resolution (67/290 para 7) says that the HLPF "shall have a thematic focus reflecting the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, in line with the thematic focus of the activities of the Council (see 68/1 Annex Para 7) and consistent with the post-2015 development agenda." Would it be practical and/or desirable for the HLPF thematic review to use the same theme as ECOSOC? It could be that HLPF might select a cluster of goals and targets each year, which might then provide the theme for ECOSOC, ensuring alignment in the work of these bodies.

II.C.2.1 Who?

States and UN entities.

II.C.2.2 By whom?

Participants in the HLPF.

II.C.2.3 About what?

The HLPF is able to chart global progress on the sustainable development framework including progress towards aggregated goals expressed at the global level. It might make sense to focus on the annual theme rather than trying to review all SDGs each year. We note that the FfD zero draft (para 123) includes a proposal that the Secretary-General convene an interagency Task Force to report annually on progress and critical gaps in implementing the global partnership for sustainable development, which would be considered by the HLPF.

II.C.2.4 Through what process?

As in the case of the national reviews, the review process could begin at agency level. All of the relevant entities prepare their own annual reports, but they could also be tasked, perhaps on a five year cycle, with reviewing their contribution to the selection of SDGs relevant to their work. The UN Secretariat, or an interagency team, could be tasked with compiling all the relevant information on the annual cluster of goals, with analysis of the reports and a summary of the data in the annual Global Sustainable Development Report.

II.C.2.5 Standard of assessment?

What does the world have to do to move more quickly towards sustainable development? Can the coherence of the UN system be improved?

II.C.2.6 With what potential effects?

What follow up is needed, by who? The Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) of UN operational activities for development (see A/67/226) is the main opportunity for members to give guidance for the whole UN system. It seems logical, therefore, that discussion in the HLPF could be an essential input, perhaps developed in preparation for its meetings under the auspices of the UNGA.

II.C.2.7 When?

As suggested in section I.7 above, the HLPF will be caught between the annual need to review immediate progress on implementation of the SDGs, and consideration of the concern of people as yet unborn.

III Conclusion

Many of the challenges that we are facing affect us all, and cannot be reduced to the national or regional context. Monitoring at the global level allowing for cross-regional communication is therefore crucial. The HLPF can be the focal point for review and follow-up of the SDGs. This architecture implies an ambitious agenda for the HLPF. Members might consider whether the eight-day meeting requires a preparatory process, which might include a “friends of the chair” group working in consultation with the ECOSOC Bureau. The involvement of Heads of State and Government every four years under the auspices of the General Assembly, and of ministers every year under the auspices of ECOSOC, creates the opportunity for a political statement at the highest levels on the overall assessment of progress towards sustainable development. This political attention could mobilize action, the ultimate manifestation of an orchestration role for the HLPF.

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