

Informal thematic meeting convened by the co-facilitators
for the intergovernmental negotiations for the review process of the Economic and Social
Council and the high-level political forum on sustainable development

Non paper by the co-facilitators:

High-level political forum on sustainable development;
thematic reviews, VNRs and other HLPF-related issues

5 March 2020

The present note aims to support the continuing discussions on the General Assembly review of the implementation of the resolutions on the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF). It builds on proposals for strengthening further the HLPF made at the first informal consultations and on other occasions. It does not aim to be exhaustive nor does it represent the views or proposals of the co-facilitators.

I. Background:

The 2030 Agenda mandated the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) to be a central platform for the follow-up and review of the Agenda at the global level. It is broadly agreed that, during its first four-year cycle, the HLPF was largely successful in fulfilling this mandate and established itself as a global platform for dialogue; reviewing SDG progress; and sharing good practices and experiences¹. The General Assembly review of the resolutions on the HLPF (67/290 and 70/299) should build on what has worked well, while improving the Forum's follow-up and review and making it more integrated, evidence-based, effective, impactful and conducive to peer learning. There will be a need to discuss what changes require additional mandates from the GA and what can be achieved through improved preparations, planning and organizing within existing mandates.

II. The HLPF under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council:

A. Thematic reviews:

The General Assembly review of the HLPF will need to build on the principles identified by the 2030 Agenda to guide follow-up and review processes at all levels, such as the voluntary and country led nature of all reviews, their open and inclusive nature, their focus on identifying achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors or their rigorous and evidence-based nature (para 24 of the 2030 Agenda).

The HLPF thematic reviews aim to foster in-depth review of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including cross cutting issues, taking into account the interlinkages among the goals.

Preparations for the thematic reviews have extended over several months. To the extent possible, DESA, the UN system and stakeholders have organized meetings at various levels to take stock of progress towards the SDGs under review and conduct in-depth analysis. ECOSOC functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies

¹ See survey conducted by DESA during the 2019 HLPF
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24802Comprehensive_HLPF_Survey_Results_FINAL.pdf

and platforms have contributed to these reviews. Preparations have also been conducted through the regional forums on sustainable development.

The GA review of the resolutions on the HLPF needs to determine how best to organize the thematic reviews for the next cycle of the HLPF. There are varied views among Member States. Some countries would like to continue reviewing small groups of SDGs every year, as done thus far, while increasing the focus on interlinkages. Others find it preferable to review the entire agenda every year, based on cross cutting themes or transformative pathways to achieve the SDGs such as the six entry points in the Global Sustainable Development Report.

It has also been proposed that the HLPF highlights better country specific progress and identifies countries at risk of being left behind. Some say that it should examine in greater depth the factors supporting or hindering progress, including bottlenecks and policy failures or successes. It should provide incentives and guidance so that implementation efforts focus more on the interlinkages among the SDGs and on the interrelations between sub-national, national, regional and global) levels of governance.

It has also been suggested that the HLPF dedicates time to discuss the policy lessons from overall SDG implementation and reflects, for example, on how best to include the SDGs in national planning and budgeting.

Some also want to further strengthen the preparations of the thematic reviews by ensuring that they fully build on science and evidence. The panel discussions at the HLPF should build better on the preparatory process. It has been underscored that the HLPF should be a year-long process culminating in the thematic panels at HLPF session.

B. Voluntary National Reviews

The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) have proven to be very successful with 142 countries having already presented their VNRs. They are voluntary, country-led, and country-driven. They have to take into account national priorities and be open and inclusive. They aim to provide a platform for partnerships. They serve as mechanisms for highlighting progress, challenges and gaps in the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with the purpose to enable peer learning and the exchange of best practices and experiences – thus accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

At the same time, some countries are of the view that the VNRs should be more comparable and follow the Secretary-General's voluntary guidelines more closely. Some want them to serve more as an accountability mechanism. Other countries underline the voluntary nature of VNRs and want to preserve their flexibility and countries' ability to frame the reports in the manner each deems best. There is generally agreement that the VNRs should put more emphasis on challenges and gaps and not only on success stories, so as to enable peer learning. Some want the VNRs to be more evidence-based and inclusive throughout the process. Some feel that the VNRs, especially second or third VNRs, should examine the trends and the impact of measures taken, rather than only describing them. Some feel that countries who have not yet presented the VNR, should be encouraged to do so. Others ask to take into account the limited capacities of some countries for conducting VNRs.

Regarding time, there is a view that the VNR presentations at the HLPF are constrained by time limits. There has been a suggestion to give more time for the presentation and particularly for discussions, which may also entail adding days to the HLPF. One proposal is to offer to VNR countries side events at the HLPF as an additional opportunity to discuss VNRs in more detail. On the other hand, some countries and actors consider that VNR countries should rather be encouraged to be succinct in their presentations at the HLPF and focus on sharing

lessons learned, good practices with transformative potential, challenges and areas where they need advice or support.

Many have called for strengthening the engagement of stakeholder in the HLPF and its preparations, including by giving more time to discussions with stakeholders during VNR preparations and presentations. Others have welcomed stakeholder's participation but cautioned about the need to preserve the intergovernmental nature of the HLPF.

Another issue to consider is the follow-up to the VNRs. One of their original purposes was to lead to the launch of partnerships. It would be important to discuss how they could lead to mobilizing support for VNR countries or continuing cooperation.

C. Ministerial Declaration and other HLPF mandates

Many feel that the political guidance and recommendations provided by the HLPF through the Ministerial Declaration could be strengthened. This could include identifying better the reasons for national and global SDG successes and shortcomings. There have been proposals to ensure that the HLPF Declarations are more evidence-based and better-prepared, identifying entry points for transformative change, and spelling out "who should do what". Some have also said that the Ministerial Declaration should reflect the discussions held during the HLPF, rather than being agreed before the Forum. At the same time some questioned whether there should be a negotiated ministerial declaration every year and instead opted to be guided by summit declarations of HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly.

There has been a major emphasis on the need for the HLPF to give greater attention to the regional dimensions, building on the regional forums on sustainable development. Another issue is how to use the forums better to discuss issues before the HLPF.

Many have said that the HLPF should give more prominent attention and more time to countries in special situations, including to the integrated implementation of the 2030 Agenda and their respective plans of action. There has also been the view that all countries at various levels of development should have dedicated attention, including developed countries (given that this is a universal agenda).

While the HLPF is mandated to receive the agreed conclusions of the ECOSOC Financing for Development Forum and the co-chairs' summary of the Multistakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation, some have underscored that the HLPF should not repeat, and, instead, should add value to the discussions of those fora.

III . HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly:

While few proposals have been made for improving the HLPF when it meets under the auspices of the General Assembly at summit level. Some have called for improving this meeting and using its two allotted days in full. It has also been proposed to use the July HLPF for preparing that SDG summit in September, in years when the HLPF meets under the auspices of the General Assembly.

There have also been discussions on whether to maintain the current four years cycle of the HLPF, which is aligned with the GA Comprehensive Policy Review of UN system operational activities (QCPR) or whether to move to a five year cycle aligned with UN Anniversaries.

IV. Connections between ECOSOC and HLPF

The 2030 Agenda mandated ECOSOC functional commissions and other inter-governmental bodies and forums to support the thematic reviews of the HLPF. Many countries and actors have recommended to make better use of the wealth of inputs received from those intergovernmental forums, the UN system and others. At the same time, the inputs of the respective forums need to adequately support the elaboration of integrated and action-oriented policy guidance and recommendations by the HLPF.

In 2018, ECOSOC was mandated to use its Integration Segment to bring together the inputs of its subsidiary bodies to the HLPF, thus paving the ground for the HLPF thematic review. The Integration Segment will be reviewed as part of the review of the implementation of resolution 72/305 on ECOSOC.

The present GA reviews of the HLPF and ECOSOC are also the opportunity to examine the contribution of ECOSOC itself to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and to the HLPF. It has been proposed that ECOSOC discusses the policy guidance that would be necessary to implement the conclusions of the HLPF reviews and the integrated policies recommended by the HLPF.

Questions for discussion:

1. How can the thematic review of the HLPF better analyze the interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs among the SDGs? Should the HLPF review all SDGs or combine a review of a small group of SDGs with a greater focus on interlinkages and a review of action areas with the greatest transformative power (such as the entry points outlined in the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report)? What would be a good substantive focus for the HLPF in 2021, 2022 and 2023?
2. What can be improved in the VNR process? What can be achieved within existing mandates, such as through the annually revised SG's guidelines and handbook for VNRs? Are countries ready and equipped to make their VNRs more evidence-based and focused on policy results and challenges? How far can we go in making the VNRs more comparable? How can we improve the impact and follow-up of the VNRs and their discussions at the HLPF, building on the innovations of the recent years?
3. How can we make HLPF declarations more evidence-based and more action oriented? Should the declarations of the HLPF be more concise and political, or fairly detailed and operational? How can the policy guidance and recommendations of the HLPF be transformative, integrated and inclusive, reflecting the principle to leave no one behind?
4. Is there need to introduce changes to the structure or duration of the session of the HLPF?
5. Are any mandated changes necessary to improve the HLPF preparatory process and to build better on the preparations including the regional forums, preparatory expert meetings, inputs of intergovernmental processes as well as analysis produced within and outside the UN system?
6. How can the regional dimension be better addressed in the HLPF?
7. What steps need to be taken to ensure that HLPF can become more inclusive of all relevant stakeholders, so that no one is left behind?

8. How can we improve the HLPF under the General Assembly (SDG Summit) and is there need to improve on its outcome? How should the July HLPF contribute to the summit? How can we make the summit more inclusive?
9. How can ECOSOC and HLPF promote the integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in a complementary manner within existing mandates? How can the Council help advance the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development, working in tandem with the HLPF? Could ECOSOC deliver some tasks that the HLPF has no time to deliver, and which ones would this be? Is there need to further clarify the respective roles of the GA, ECOSOC and the HLPF and how can this be done?