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A Briefing Note of the Workshop on Making the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Work: How to Build an Effective “Review Mechanism”

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BRIEFING NOTE ON THE WORKSHOP ON MAKING THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WORK: HOW TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE “REVIEW MECHANISM”: 20 FEBRUARY 2014

The workshop on ‘Making the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Work: How to build an effective “Review Mechanism”’ took place in New York, US, on 20 February 2014.

The workshop was sponsored by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and Permanent Missions of seven governments: Egypt, Liechtenstein, Norway, Peru, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Switzerland, with invited participants from other governments, the UN Secretariat, including an Assistant Secretary-General from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and NGOs, as well as two expert commenters.

The workshop sought to create an open discussion around the review mechanism that will begin in 2016, ahead of the intergovernmental process on this issue. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) established the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2012 when it adopted the outcome of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). In 2013, the UNGA decided 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 aim of this workshop was to identify potential “landing zones” where consensus on the design of the review mechanism could be detected and strengthened.

During the workshop, participants engaged in an exchange of views and ideas about the possible elements, purpose and outcome of the review process. At the end of the workshop, the moderator noted that “integration” and “coherence” were two of the most frequently used words during the workshop, and predicted that “the world will apply these yardsticks to the review mechanism.”

This briefing note summarizes the presentations and discussions during the workshop. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule and this briefing note therefore does not identify speakers.

REPORT OF THE WORKSHOP

KEY REMARKS

The workshop opened on Thursday morning, 20 February, with the Permanent Representative of Norway welcoming participants on behalf of the seven sponsoring missions.

The Permanent Representatives of Egypt, Norway, Pakistan and Peru spoke in opening remarks. Among other things, they stated that: the HLPF is regarded as the home for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and that a robust review mechanism is needed to fulfill this role; each time an SDG target is decided,

the need to measure progress must be remembered; transparency and accountability for implementation are critical, and should apply to both developing and developed countries; and the review should be linked with the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) to avoid duplication.

The Permanent Representations further commented that: the review should cover a large number of countries; there is a need to help developing countries with implementation and to create incentives; the review should enable developing countries to showcase their achievements; and the process should be simple, flexible and allow for “learning by doing.”

A representative of IISD said the workshop aimed to provide a platform for participants to express their hopes and concerns about the design of the review mechanism. Another IISD representative presented the background paper for the workshop, ‘Building an Effective Review Mechanism: Lessons for the HLPF,’ highlighting six questions about the review: who is to be reviewed; by whom; about what; through what process; using what standards; and what is the review to achieve: learning, policy changes, and/or access to means of implementation? He stressed that participants on both sides of a review process must see its benefits.

INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION

During the interactive segment of the workshop, participants responded to the opening remarks, posed questions to each other, and received input from the moderator regarding possible themes, preferences and concerns.

Many participants expressed appreciation for the background paper prepared by IISD. Some offered suggestions, such as including the climate change system in the list of examples of existing review mechanisms, noting that it reflects the concept of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities.

Several participants called for the review mechanism to take an innovative approach, highlighting the innovative nature of the HLPF itself, the opportunity to craft something “fresh and modern,” and the need to learn from problems with existing review mechanisms such as the Annual Ministerial Review.

Some participants expressed a preference for a positive, inspirational review process that celebrates achievement, avoids finger-pointing, and is non-threatening. Others opposed this view, suggesting that a review that is “too soft” would not help, and underlining that both developed and developing countries need to be more serious about implementing commitments. Another noted that the SDGs will be political commitments, not legal ones, making national-level implementation key to their success.

Some echoed the emphasis on a learning-focused, iterative approach highlighted in opening comments, with one noting that “we learn best from failure” and should therefore identify barriers to implementation. A note of caution was sounded by some about shifting the goalposts at every HLPF meeting. One participant suggested that for the three years when the HLPF convenes, diplomatic energy should be spent on implementation. In the fourth year of the cycle, however, when it meets at a higher level, the Forum could look at the lessons learned and shift the goal posts if needed.



One expert commenter said an emphasis on learning does not mean the review mechanism can only showcase achievements. He noted that learning also occurs by looking at cause-effect relationships between policies and outcomes.

Some participants cited the need for coherence and cautioned against crafting new things without links to what is already happening, with several noting that the work of the DCF and other bodies should not be duplicated. To this end, one expert commenter suggested that the review could be a decentralized process, with the HLPF playing a role to ensure higher-level accountability and comparability among processes.

One participant recalled the words of Sha Zukang, former Secretary-General of Rio+20, that “implementation, integration and coherence” are the key gaps that Rio+20 tried to address, and where big impact is needed. An expert commenter affirmed that the HLPF has an explicit mandate to focus on coherence and integration, noting this makes it unique and should drive the review process.

Regarding “who is being reviewed,” some countries suggested working at multiple levels, for example holding an internal review at the national level, followed by regional and then international reviews. Others suggested having small groups of countries review each other first, organized according to region or other criteria.

One participant argued for reviewing all countries, in order for each country to feel comfortable with the process. Another participant said, however, that, if countries present their reports during high-level ministers’ segments – “prime time” – there would only be time to review a few countries each year. He added that ministerial-level reviews also could result in a “rosy picture” rather than a critical examination of lessons learned.

One participant asked how developed countries could go beyond reporting just on their international development efforts and include their domestic efforts to promote sustainable development. Another participant stressed the importance of countries regarding the review mechanism as being in their interest. One commenter said developing countries should be supported to report and participate in the review, and that means of implementation must therefore be subject to the review.

On the question of “by whom,” that is, who will conduct the review, one participant suggested that this did not need to be either “horizontal” (peer) or “vertical” (hierarchical), but that it could be a state-led, neutral review with broad participation from stakeholders.

Some participants asked what arrangements would be politically feasible, given the “political contestation” over the HLPF’s nature, and legal and structural identity.

One participant argued that, contrary to one of the sponsoring governments’ opening remarks, the HLPF will not be the sole institutional home for the post-2015 development agenda. He said that instead, there should be multiple institutional bases of support for the agenda, including at national levels and in multilateral institutions, although the UN could provide a “center of gravity” for the agenda.

An expert commenter said participants had identified four purposes of a review: measuring, learning, enabling, and holding to account. One participant said the purposes of the review should be to ensure accountability on implementation, and promote policy changes.

An expert commenter also noted four challenges the design process would need to overcome: enabling participation and ensuring the benefits of participation are clear to participants; balancing the broad sustainability agenda with the need for focused review, which could perhaps be resolved by using the SDGs as a focus; ensuring coherence among the dimensions of sustainable development and among existing processes; and deciding whether the review would be a mutual one, and whether it would promote accountability on voluntary commitments.

Some participants suggested that the review design process must take into account an additional question that was not asked in the Background Paper: the question of “to whom,” or on whose behalf the review would be conducted.

One participant said stakeholders would provide accountability and legitimacy for the review, both by helping collect data on progress, and by attending the review meetings and offering feedback on the results. Another participant said the focus on accountability reflects frustration with the failure to fulfil commitments and that clarity about the causes of this failure would be useful.

A UN system representative highlighted the Global Reporting Initiative as the “gold standard” for sustainability reporting. He said the business community is becoming more proactive about issues that are “material for financial success,” such as supply chain issues, transparency and corruption. He added that, since “you can no longer hide dark sides deep in your supply chain,” private investment has gained a stronger focus on building markets, which creates greater overlap among private and public interests. Another participant stressed that private businesses are the primary producers of waste, not UN entities or governments, but that yet, they are rarely held accountable.

Participants also commented that: the review should not focus too much on environmental issues, but should bring the three dimensions of sustainable development to bear; each possible review mechanism should include its “price tag,” since the UNGA’s Fifth Committee will ask for this before approving the mechanism; and there is a need for high-quality data and analysis, and accompanying capacity building.

The moderator suggested that the discussion had raised the need for four “balancing acts” between: celebration and seriousness of the review; the broad mandate of sustainable development and a narrower focus for implementation; inspiration and the practical concerns to be addressed; and effort, which is easier to measure, and impact, which is the “great promise.”

He also said the list of words used most often during the discussion includes “integration” and “coherence,” predicting that the world will apply these yardsticks to the review mechanism.

CLOSING COMMENTS

In closing remarks, an IISD representative said there had been a call for governments to be accountable both to their citizens, and – at the global level – to all people including generations unborn. He described the challenge as a kind of “Rubik’s cube” because of remaining uncertainties about the HLPF.

He also noted the challenge of financing frequent reviews, but highlighted the need for enough frequency to have feedback loops of learning, and suggested two ways to resolve this: having a regional review process that would feed reports to the HLPF annual sessions; or having a UN Secretariat report pull together other relevant reviews for discussion in the HLPF. Finally, he observed a lack of discussion around the Global Sustainable Development Report.

Another IISD representative observed a strong sense among participants that they must get the review mechanism right. He said they were in the “discovery phase” of putting everything on the table, seeing how things can be organized, and boiling it down to the key elements that Member States must discuss and agree upon. He explained that the next steps for IISD would be to distill this conversation and hopefully help identify landing zones, which would enable the process to “come to earth at some point.”

Following concluding remarks and thanks from the Permanent Representative of Switzerland, the workshop was brought to a close shortly after 1 pm.