



HLPF Bulletin

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

Published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

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VOLUME 221, NUMBER 2, SUNDAY, 18 MAY 2014

SECOND WORKSHOP ON MAKING THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WORK: HOW TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE “REVIEW MECHANISM”: 15 MAY 2014

The second 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 15 May 2014. The workshop was sponsored by the Permanent Missions to the United Nations of Egypt, Liechtenstein, Norway, Peru, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Switzerland, and organized by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). Invited participants included representatives of governments, the UN Secretariat, including an Assistant Secretary-General from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and NGOs.

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, beginning 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 (A/RES/67/290).

The first IISD workshop, held on 20 February 2014, was aimed at identifying potential “landing zones” for consensus on the design of the review mechanism. The second workshop sought to intensify discussion on issues that emerged during the first workshop, narrow down the range of options within each issue, and identify key challenges to be negotiated. A background paper for the workshop prepared by IISD elaborated five questions for consideration by participants: Who is to be reviewed, by whom and how often? What is to be reviewed? What might be the incentives to participate? What is the optimal approach for national and systemic reviews? And how will the review outputs link to other elements of the HLPF/SDG/Post-2015 puzzle, and to the wider geography of sustainable development endeavor?

During the workshop, participants heard presentations from selected participants, and then divided into five groups to discuss the five questions outlined in the background paper. The five groups reported on their discussions to the group as a whole, which had a general exchange of views.

This briefing note summarizes the presentations and discussions during the workshop. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule and, therefore, this briefing note does not identify those who expressed views.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The workshop opened on Thursday morning, 15 May, with the Permanent Representative of Switzerland, Paul Seger, welcoming participants.

High-level participants from host governments and the UN Secretariat gave remarks on the key questions for the workshop. On “who is to be reviewed,” one said that national governments, along with other implementers of the UN framework and the post-2015 development agenda, should be included. On “who is doing the review,” one emphasized national reviews with governments in the driver’s seat, and said the reviews should be brought straight to the HLPF. Setting up additional tiers, such as at regional commissions, would cause the HLPF to lose control and traction, he said. Another speaker highlighted the role of civil society, observing that the “explosion of the internet” has made everything more participatory.

On “what is to be reviewed,” one said the review should have a sharp focus on SDGs, be based on the Global Sustainable Development Report and national priorities, and—calling the review process a “two-way street”—said it should help assess the effectiveness of the means of implementation and the global partnership for development.

On “incentives to participate,” it was stressed that the review process should not be seen as a burden, and the right incentives could help eliminate fears about monitoring and assessment. Incentives could include sharing experiences, building capacity for good data at the national level, and building human and institutional capacities.

On how the review’s outputs will link to other elements of the “HLPF/SDGs/post-2015 puzzle,” one speaker said this will not remain a puzzle for long. Member States will soon have a blueprint including crosswalks between the different fora dealing with the sustainable development agenda.

Speakers also addressed the intended effects of the review mechanism. One proposed that the mechanism should continually review the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals (SDGs), themselves. Countries should not be “stuck with the agenda” for 15 years if a review shows that it is not achievable, or that something can be improved. Another said the review should serve to maintain the ambition of the SDGs amid crises and other distractions. It also should reinforce that

The *HLPF Bulletin* is a publication of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) <info@iisd.ca>, publishers of the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* © <enb@iisd.org>. This issue was written and edited by Ana Maria Lebada and Faye Leone. The Editor is Pamela Chasek, Ph.D. <pam@iisd.org>. The Director of IISD Reporting Services is Langston James “Kimo” Goree VI <kimo@iisd.org>. Funding for coverage of this meeting has been provided by the Governments of Switzerland and Norway. IISD can be contacted at 161 Portage Avenue East, 6th Floor, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 0Y4, Canada; tel: +1-204-958-7700; fax: +1-204-958-7710. The opinions expressed in the *Bulletin* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IISD. Excerpts from the *Bulletin* may be used in other publications with appropriate academic citation. Electronic versions of the *Bulletin* are sent to e-mail distribution lists (in HTML and PDF format) and can be found on the Linkages WWW-server at <http://www.iisd.ca/>. For information on the *Bulletin*, including requests to provide reporting services, contact the Director of IISD Reporting Services at <kimo@iisd.org>, +1-646-536-7556 or 300 East 56th St., 11D, New York, New York 10022, USA.



governments are accountable to their people. It was noted that both learning and accountability can come from the preparation of reports at the national level, and that in this sense “the process is the product.” One speaker stressed the need to engage countries’ populations and ministries, to ensure it is not just a “bureaucratic exercise in New York” but also drives national and local action. The moderator added that national and local action must also translate to global-level impacts.

Overall, it was stressed, the review should result in stronger support—financial and otherwise—to implement the SDGs.

INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION

Participants engaged in discussion on the five questions identified in the background paper, first through breakout groups and then in a general exchange of views. The breakout groups were not tasked with achieving consensus but with identifying a “spectrum of options” or possible answers to each question.

1. Who is to be reviewed, by whom and how often? On “who is to be reviewed,” participants considered governments the most convenient unit of analysis.

On “by whom,” some in this group indicated a preference for peer review by Member States (horizontal review), but also saw advantages in input from civil society, the private sector, etc. The group identified the following elements as important in reaching agreement on a horizontal versus vertical review process: whether the HLPF will review only the SDGs or also other parts of the post-2015 development agenda; and whether the quantitative aspects of the targets will be decided at the global or the national level. On the involvement of other stakeholders, the group said questions of how to feed their inputs into the reviews, in what capacity, and at what level were complex issues that need careful consideration. In the general discussion that followed the report of this breakout group, some participants highlighted the need to apply the review mechanisms to all actors and to ensure representation of all stakeholders.

On “how often,” participants said the mechanism could conduct more comprehensive reviews less often, or less comprehensive reviews more often, while also considering the possibility of different timelines for different SDGs. They recognized the direct impact of this decision on the number of countries that can be reviewed each year. Some suggested that the HLPF could review reports prepared by other UN entities and/or regional and international institutions, instead of conducting the review process itself.

According to one participant, evaluating impacts would be feasible only after a few years, but evaluating efforts could begin immediately.

2. What is to be reviewed? This breakout group considered whether the scope of the review should be broad or narrow, with some preference for “starting modestly” to ensure concrete results. If a thematic focus is taken, they suggested, the same theme could be the subject of that year’s Global Sustainable Development Report. The review should also consider the goals and targets themselves, and whether they are over-ambitious or not ambitious enough.

Participants agreed that the review should adopt a positive focus and would be useful as long as countries benefit from and feel ownership of the review. Finally, it should strike a balance between focus on outcome and effort, and between qualitative and quantitative approaches.

This group also suggested that the nature of the HLPF could be different depending on whether it takes place under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or UN General Assembly, in order to take advantage of the higher level of participation in the latter.

3. What might be the incentives to participate? Participants considered incentives for both national participation in the review process and high-level participation in the HLPF.

Regarding the national level, many participants said the “nature of the review” would be a factor in countries’ participation. To this end, they recommended making the review a positive process, safe from criticism, and with an emphasis on learning. In the general discussion following the report of the breakout group, other participants noted that accountability should not be associated with “pointing fingers.” Some objected to choosing between positive learning and criticism, and preferred to explore a spectrum of options between these two extremes. Incentives realized after the review could include contributions to capacity building and creation of sustainable national review mechanisms.

Regarding the ministerial level, participants said the theme of the review would be a determining factor. Some suggested organizing each review around a common challenge (such as those faced by small island developing states) to entice countries to share experiences with a peer group. An alternative focus for the review could be a systemic one, addressing the gaps left by other review processes, and supporting the integration of all three dimensions of sustainable development at the national level. In this regard, one participant noted, the HLPF could serve to aggregate existing thematic forums and mechanisms. It was also noted that the first round of reviews would be very important to attract the interest and support of ministers.

In the general discussion that followed the report of this breakout group, one participant said developing countries perceive “review” as a preaching session, and that incorporating means of implementation could give developing countries a stake in participating. In addition, developing countries will want to play a role in the review, not only to be the object of review. One participant said that while 2016-2017 would be especially important, it was unclear what could be reviewed, since it would be difficult to measure achievement of the SDGs within one or two years.

4. What is the optimal approach for national and systemic reviews? This breakout group emphasized differentiation, highlighting the importance of national ownership of the review process and the accompanying need to build capacity at the national level, including statistical and institutional capacity. Even a national-level, country-owned process must lead to global results, some stressed. This will need careful consideration in the context of differentiated targets, which would lead to differentiated plans for implementation at the national level and, therefore, differentiated reports to the HLPF.

Participants agreed that the review must be flexible in order to reach the optimal result, so that governments are not “locked” into something from the beginning.

Participants said the Global Sustainable Development Report was a potential tool to bring coherence to the review architecture, which also includes regional peer reviews and other existing mechanisms.

On the nature of the review, participants said it should be oriented toward learning, while also including a focus on accountability.

5. How will the review outputs link to other elements of the HLPF/SDG/Post-2015 puzzle, and to the wider geography of sustainable development endeavor? This breakout group said their discussion showed that “when you pull on one thread, many others come with it,” as the answers to this question relate to the previous four questions, as well as to unresolved aspects of the post-2015 development agenda.

Participants addressed the need for both universality and differentiation, suggesting that a thematic or SDG-specific focus would make the review relevant for all countries. However, this assumes that each SDG will equally incorporate the three dimensions of sustainable development. Focusing the HLPF review on a goal that emphasizes one of the dimensions at the expense of the others, would “reintroduce silos” rather than provide integration and coherence.

Participants noted that an accountability framework for the post-2015 development agenda was being discussed, and said this framework should not duplicate the HLPF’s mandated review mechanism. They also noted that the HLPF review should not duplicate, but build on, existing mechanisms in the UN system.

The breakout group also suggested that the concrete indicators expected to be determined as part of the post-2015 development agenda could help to structure the HLPF’s review process. The review should help identify implementation bottlenecks, the group added.

On partnerships, some participants said national reviews could be complemented by “shadow reporting” from civil society, UN agencies and others. They added that the HLPF could provide more structured arrangements for global partnerships, which have been *ad hoc* for the Millennium Development Goals.

In the general discussion that followed the report of this breakout group, it was highlighted that the HLPF will be part of a larger architecture for post-2015 accountability.

GENERAL COMMENTS

In the general discussion that followed the five breakout groups’ reports, the moderator asked participants what issues could threaten consensus on the review mechanism. Participants highlighted that accountability is a “two-way street” and holding governments accountable must happen alongside accountability for private companies and civil society. Participants also emphasized the difference between an accountability process that emphasizes voluntary participation and learning by doing, building on the current Annual Ministerial Review conducted by ECOSOC, and one that uses criteria to create comparability. One participant said the system is not designed to support synergies among reporting processes, as each convention and body has its own reporting provisions and schedule. Finally, a participant asked about accountability for developing countries’

role in generating means of implementation (other than official development assistance), such as domestic resource mobilization. The moderator concluded that these topics were among the “hard nuts to be cracked” in reaching agreement on the review mechanism.

An IISD representative drew attention to accountability as a tool toward a larger goal, not an “automatic good” in itself. The moderator recalled that a common belief at the time of the 1992 Rio Conference was that governments could “negotiate their way out of a problem.” Over 20 years later, he said, attention has shifted to monitoring and reporting on what has been agreed, and cautioned that we must not attempt to “report our way out of the problem.”

A representative from the UN Secretariat said business is comfortable with evaluation, and that while small- and medium-sized enterprises might have anxieties about the reporting process, they will want to be involved.

Another IISD representative highlighted the need to put shape and context around accountability, and identified as possible landing zones:

- the framework provided by the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs;
- the focus on implementation, including means of implementation;
- the aim of universal goals with some differentiation in implementation, in accordance with national circumstances;
- agreement on a thematic basis for the review that also would reinforce integration across the three dimensions of sustainable development and avoid creating “silos”;
- a focus on accountability as a positive, learning-oriented experience for those under review;
- the central purpose of tracking progress towards achieving the goals; and
- permitting a review of the goals and targets themselves.

He also suggested that the review could benefit from convergence of different elements, such as through the Global Sustainable Development Report, or a “reporting of reporting” mechanism. Finally, he proposed that the first year or two of the review mechanism could be spent establishing baselines and national strategies to implement the goals and targets, following which the review could look at implementation of those plans.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The IISD representative noted that the workshop did not have enough time to look at the review of the UN entities, international institutions and processes, and linkages between them, which is also an important aspect called for in the UNGA resolution.

In concluding remarks, the Permanent Representative of Norway, Geir Pedersen, said the discussion had shown that the review must not be only theoretical but also have an impact, in order to demonstrate its value to leaders, such as by offering a learning opportunity and identifying bottlenecks. In addition, the review must prove important not only in the national context but also bring countries together globally. He thanked participants on behalf of the seven host governments, and closed the workshop at 1:00 pm.