

# Follow-Up and Review for the 2030 Agenda: Bringing coherence to the work of the HLPF

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## 1. Introduction

The plan of action set out in *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2030 Agenda) requires “implementation by all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership.”<sup>1</sup> That action will not happen by itself. States are committed (A/RES/70/1, paras 72 and 73) to engaging in “systematic follow-up and review of implementation. The objective, operating at the national, regional and global levels, is to promote accountability to citizens, support effective international cooperation in achieving the Agenda and foster exchanges of best practices and mutual learning.” This options paper is intended as a contribution to current discussions<sup>2</sup> on how to ensure that the follow-up and review process for the 2030 Agenda works well, and is effective.<sup>3</sup>

When they agreed on the 2030 Agenda, states assigned a “central role to the high-level political forum (HLPF) in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level through sharing of experiences, and providing political leadership, with the aim of promoting system-wide coherence” (A/RES/70/1, para 82). The

<sup>1</sup> This United Nations document can be found here: [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E). Subsequent references to this document will be cited in text as A/RES/70/1.

<sup>2</sup> The co-facilitators’ road map for the consultations is at [http://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2015/08/17-Mar\\_2030-Agenda-Follow-up-and-review-17-March-2016.pdf](http://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2015/08/17-Mar_2030-Agenda-Follow-up-and-review-17-March-2016.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Our previous work on the HLPF is available at <http://www.iisd.org/library/architecture-review-and-follow-sdgs-options-high-level-political-forum>

challenge now is to visualize how all the parts of the 2030 Agenda fit together in a way that will allow everyone everywhere to assess overall progress towards sustainable development, and to know what more needs to be done. That assessment must be holistic, but it cannot be a unitary view of such a complex system; we need a kaleidoscopic view of the follow-up and review system’s objectives and tools, one that will differ depending on who is making the assessment.

Our focus is on the Secretary-General’s set of *Critical Milestones* (A/70/684),<sup>4</sup> and the consultations now underway for a General Assembly resolution on the follow-up and review process. We side-step discussion of both the consultations underway on a proposal for strategically aligning the agenda of future sessions of the UNGA with the 2030 Agenda,<sup>5</sup> and the consultations on the scope, frequency and methodology for the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR).<sup>6</sup> We simply take note of the work of the UN Statistical Commission on indicators.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than comment on every aspect of the Secretary-General’s report, we focus on the HLPF as the apex of a

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. (2016, January 15). *Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level*. Report of the Secretary-General. A/70/684. Retrieved from [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/684&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/684&Lang=E). Subsequent references to this document will be referred to in text as A/70/684.

<sup>5</sup> <http://sd.iisd.org/news/unga-president-announces-process-to-align-unga-with-2030-agenda/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9670ECOSOC%20President%20Letter%20to%20MS%20on%20GSDR.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> IAEG document E/CN.3/2016/2/Rev.1.

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pyramid. If the other parts are not robust, the structure will collapse. And we focus in particular on the HLPF agenda, which has implications for how the work of the HLPF is structured; what the inputs are, including how they are assembled and synthesized; and on what the outputs from its meetings should be—thus, how the HLPF relates to the rest of the UN system.

Here is the central question: How should participants define success for the HLPF? We think that success would be a holistic *review* of the 2030 Agenda with a concrete sense of who needs to do what to *follow-up*. That definition implies a focus both on what comes *in* to HLPF, and what goes *out*.

In this policy brief, we start by outlining (2) the 21st-century approach to follow-up and review. We then consider (3) the agenda for the HLPF, (4) relevant review bodies and forums mentioned in the Secretary-General's report, and then (5) the potential reports that they generate. Those reports and reviews will be useful for the HLPF, especially if they are aggregated in a (searchable) global database, and then synthesized for ministers and senior officials; they will also be useful for (6) national reviews. We then reflect on (7) the thematic organization of the HLPF agenda, and (8) the ways of recording the output of the HLPF in a ministerial declaration and the President's summary. We conclude with some questions (9) that are intended to summarize what we see as the key elements that might now be addressed.

## 2. The 21st-Century Approach to Follow-Up and Review

The ultimate objective of follow-up and review is “accountability to our citizens” (A/RES/70/1, para 73), which really means accountability to ourselves. Follow-up and review is not about a country being forced to give an account of itself to foreigners. The purpose is learning by asking whether you are achieving your own objectives. Just having Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not transform our world—writing the goals down in one place is important, but that in itself does not cause policy to change on the ground. The review process—if it works, if people engage, if it generates a real conversation—might promote change and coherence. As we see also in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Agreement, the 21st-century approach to accountability is based on the assumption that states change policy not because they fear the consequences of failure to comply, and only partly because they worry about

being embarrassed in front of their peers. They mostly change because they have learned about successful action and, hence, come to believe that policy should change. The assumption is that information can change behaviour. When actors receive new information about themselves, become aware of alternatives, or perceive the social acceptability of particular norms, they may adopt new forms of behaviour. People have to acknowledge a problem, then see it as both urgent and one for which they have personal responsibility. But nothing happens if people do not know what to do.

A common phrase in the Secretary-General's report (A/70/684) is “assessing progress,” but how will progress towards sustainable development be recognized from the standpoints of governments and of people affected? How will we know what follow-up is needed? The 2030 Agenda sets out aspirational objectives, not legally binding obligations; hence, choosing criteria for a review is delicate. It is one thing to ask if a government's actions are consistent with its commitments 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. For example, paragraph 82 of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA)<sup>8</sup> says: “We will **endeavour** to significantly increase world trade in a manner consistent with the sustainable development goals, including exports from developing countries, in particular from least developed countries, with a view towards doubling their share of global exports by 2020 as stated in the Istanbul Programme of Action.” Experts will try to quantify the underlined promises, but the ones in **bold** are about the efforts of governments.

Achieving the 2030 Agenda will require coherent systemic support, but most of the needed action on sustainable development is national, even local. In this sense, the new accountability paradigm is bottom-up not top-down. The great achievement of the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change is that governments agreed to provide information on what they are doing on climate change, and to allow public scrutiny of such action as well as collective review. The Paris Agreement requires everybody to notify their indicative nationally determined contributions (INDCs) to the UNFCCC Secretariat, along with the steps being taken to implement those INDCs. Success will require robust surveillance of these notifications. This type of reporting is about effort, but we also need to ask if we are meeting our objectives. Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, (2015) ‘Addis Ababa Action Agenda,’ Outcome document of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, A/CONF.227/L.1, 15 July 2015.



requires comparing what we have achieved when measured against our initial aspirations and comparing ourselves to our peers. Are we meeting our own goals? Are we doing as well as similarly situated communities or countries? Are we trying as hard as we can? What can we learn from the achievements of others, and what can we learn from how others see us? And are we collectively doing enough to support each other in these efforts?

The 2030 Agenda is complex, with many moving parts—17 SDGs, 169 targets and some 230 indicators will be monitored not just by every country but also by dozens of international organizations, and a multitude of think tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The AAAA is equally complex. The most important place to review implementation of the 2030 Agenda will be at the national level, but regional reviews will allow comparison of similar countries and take advantage of existing peer learning mechanisms. Regional review will also be needed, because what happens in one part of the world has effects in others, and because of the interrelated effects and trade-offs among the goals. Global review is needed because countries in different regions or at the same level of development may face similar challenges and, hence, have lessons to share.

### 3. The Agenda for the HLPF

The task for the HLPF is to identify obstacles to implementation of the 2030 Agenda and find ways to deal with them. Its role involves orchestration, which depends on providing incentives and a framework for everyone to participate, including states, UN entities, business and NGOs—all the stakeholders who should be involved in the process. The process has to be bottom up, but the UN, through the HLPF, can coordinate and encourage.

The HLPF has a huge agenda for the eight days that it has been allocated. Ministers will be expected to come for three days, which will include brief presentations by ministers on voluntary national reviews. In his report (A/70/684, para. 21), all the Secretary-General says about the agenda is that it could typically include four parts:

- “(a) Review of overall progress, with the review of the SDGs progress report, national reviews, and regional reviews;
- (b) review of progress in specific areas, with thematic review on the theme and in-depth reviews of a subset of SDGs;

- (c) review of Goal 17 and other inputs on the implementation of the AAAA; and
- (d) new and emerging issues and looking to the long term.”

How can this agenda, which risks being overloaded, be seen in a coherent way? How many views can participants hear in eight days? Can it actually be a high-level discussion, or will the opportunities for discussion among ministers and senior officials be crushed under the weight of too much information? How does the Secretariat organize the stream of data to the HLPF such that high-level participants can make effective use of it? Having the HLPF as a focal point should help to provide coordination and direction for all parts of the UN system, but it is important too that the forum be a deliberative body and not merely a symbol. As the Secretary-General notes, “It will be important to help the HLPF to derive political guidance from the multiple inputs it will receive. The secretariats ... must work coherently to support effective global review” (A/70/684, para. 55).

We think that means that the HLPF needs both a clear preparatory process and a way to organize its agenda. The annual theme should help the UN system to orient itself to the needs of the HLPF, but the theme should also be something capable of stimulating an interesting discussion that would enable the HLPF to provide political guidance.

### 4. Review Bodies

The HLPF is the culmination of a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level. Its thematic reviews of progress on the SDGs, including cross-cutting issues, will be supported by a plethora of bodies where much of the real discussion, analysis and eventual follow-up must take place. Generating the data for the indicators designed to provide an overall snapshot of the SDGs is not the same as ensuring that some body of states meeting under the auspices of an international organization reviews whatever information is available to them. Indicators serve the process, but they do not explain themselves. What matters is how states learn, and that happens through discussion at all levels, both of specific elements of the agenda and of how they all fit together as a coherent whole. The orchestration role of the HLPF depends on identifying all the players.



Relevant bodies mentioned or implied in the Secretary-General's report include:<sup>9</sup>

- ECOSOC functional and regional commissions
  - Regional forums on sustainable development
  - Partnerships, youth and others
  - Countries in special situations
  - Commission for Social Development
  - Forums on specific population groups, such as migrants or indigenous people
- Inputs to HLPF on AAAA:
  - Financing for Development (FFD) Forum
  - Multistakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation (STI)
  - Development Cooperation Forum (DCF)
  - Global Infrastructure Forum
  - Meetings of the international financial institutions
  - Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation
- United Nations Environment Assembly
- World Education Forum
- World Health Assembly,
- International Labour Conference
- Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization
- World Trade Organization
- UN Conference on Trade and Development
- United Nations Industrial Development Organization
- Committee on World Food Security
- Human Rights Council
- Annual meetings of the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund
- Other assemblies and treaty bodies

These bodies have three roles to play. First, many of them are explicitly or implicitly tasked by one or more of the goals and targets, and they should ask themselves how they are doing. How can the HLPF encourage all of these bodies to think about their own contribution to the 2030 Agenda. Second, as outlined in the next section, they are all a source of the data needed by the HLPF. And, third,

they all offer an opportunity for an initial discussion of that data prior to review in the HLPF.

The challenge in thinking about the role of all these bodies in relation to the HLPF will be ensuring coherence in the work of the sprawling UN system. One way to do that will be through the annual theme, as discussed in Section 7 below. The Secretary-General observes (A/70/684, para. 50) that the HLPF “thematic reviews will help to link the various parts of the United Nations system intergovernmental architecture. It will allow intergovernmental forums to contribute to the work of the HLPF on any theme and alert it about emerging issues or gaps.” The efforts of functional commissions and other intergovernmental forums to support the 2030 Agenda will be facilitated if they know the themes of the HLPF well in advance; such *predictability* would enable *timely and effective contributions to the thematic reviews*, in whatever form each body sees as appropriate.

## 5. Reporting on Follow-Up and Review

All of those bodies will generate many reports that will be or could be destined to the HLPF. The system proposed by the Secretary-General to support national review envisages myriad reports. But country-based reporting is only one of the streams of follow-up and review that will culminate in the HLPF. Here we list them based on reports mentioned or implied in the Secretary-General's report. They fall in four groups:

1. Main reports for the HLPF:
  - a) Global Sustainable Development Report (every four years?)
  - b) SDGs progress report (annual)
  - c) Annual report from the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on progress in implementing the AAAA and the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda
  - d) Reviews by the regional forums on sustainable development
2. UN Intergovernmental reporting obligations in many areas related to the SDGs:
  - a) Universal periodic review to the Human Rights Council

<sup>9</sup> For a much longer list prepared by the TST see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/7186Short%20matrix%20-%20revised%2029.5.pdf>



- b) Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
  - c) Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
  - d) Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
  - e) UNFCCC (both on mitigation and adaptation)
  - f) Convention on Biological Diversity
  - g) Basel Convention
  - h) CITES
  - i) ILO supervisory mechanisms on the application of International Labour Standards
  - j) Other treaty monitoring bodies
3. Reports from reviews conducted by relevant non-United Nations organizations that could be relevant:
- a) African Union peer reviews
  - b) Pacific Island Forum reviews
  - c) World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade Policy Reviews
  - d) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reviews in many domains
  - e) G20 Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform Peer Review process
4. Major groups and other relevant stakeholders individually or collectively reporting on their contribution to implementation, including, for example:
- a) Businesses
  - b) NGOs
  - c) Specific partnerships and alliances
  - d) Large cities

The Secretary-General's report is right that "only by hearing multiple perspectives, ideas and evidence can the HLPF break new ground" (A/70/684, para. 66) But the risk of cacophony should not be underestimated. The flow of reporting aimed at the HLPF will combine into a mighty river of undigested information surging towards New York, with a very real risk that this massive flood will overwhelm the HLPF and ensure that its debates are confined to generalities.

The annual HLPF can be the occasion for one of the listed bodies to prepare a report, but the exercise should first be useful for the body preparing the report. The report

should then be capable of being made available in a way that allows others to extract the information that might be relevant for them. We therefore support the Secretary-General's observation (A/70/684, para 54) that "inputs to the HLPF from functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies and forums might follow a simple template covering:

- (a) an assessment of areas of progress and setback at the global level;
- (b) the identification of areas requiring urgent attention;
- (c) valuable lessons learned;
- (d) emerging issues;
- (e) areas where political guidance is required; and
- (f) policy recommendations and tools to accelerate progress."

We would add first that the template could be used by any body submitting input for the HLPF, and not just functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies. Second, the template should include a section linking the sectoral perspective of the organization to the 2030 Agenda as a whole through the annual theme of the HLPF. We would suggest a limit on the main document of 1,000 words, with perhaps 6–10 pages of background analysis and links to the supporting reports of the organization for readers wanting more information.

The subsequent challenge will be synthesizing the vast number of inputs aimed at the HLPF. Doing that in a concise policy-relevant way informed by the latest scientific knowledge could be a major contribution to follow-up and review. The Secretary-General suggests (A/70/684, para. 55) that "the various contributions could be assembled and consolidated into a database for open reviewing and commenting. The key messages and findings could then be compiled by the Secretariat through a collaborative process to support the thematic review and also be made available on the database." This part of the proposal refers only to inputs from functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies and forums. With respect to national reviews, the Secretariat has many ideas for an "online platform to support and document the reviews" (A/70/684, para. 86) but more ambition is needed. All of the input to the HLPF from whatever source should be in an online database that is searchable by country, by SDG and by theme.

Let us give just one example of the problem. ICTSD and IISD prepared a paper on how to do follow-up and review



of the trade-related commitments found throughout the SDGs and the AAAA.<sup>10</sup> That paper concluded that achievement of the 2030 Agenda will require a discussion at global level of the interrelated effects and trade-offs of all of those commitments. Given the plethora of data and places where trade-related elements of the 2030 Agenda could be reviewed, the outcomes of these reviews, should they take place in different organizations, would probably be most useful to the HLPF if they were analytically aggregated, perhaps in a periodic synthesis report prepared by an inter-agency task force coordinated by the WTO. The aim of such a thematic report on the trade-related elements would be to keep attention on the trade policy “forest” as opposed to all the “trees.” And that is just one domain.

Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda is a polycentric or kaleidoscopic process in which everybody needs information, but not presented in the same way. So we need to think about ways to extract and synthesize information in order to support all the possible users. The Secretary-General recognizes (A/70/684, para. 55) that it will be “important to help the forum to derive political guidance from the multiple inputs it will receive. The secretariats of the various United Nations system intergovernmental bodies must work coherently to support effective global review.” What kind of active intervention by the Secretariat will be needed, beyond simply creating a database? Could the Secretariat prepare an annual paper that synthesizes all the material forwarded to the HLPF? It could be structured using the headings of the template suggested for inputs from functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies.

## 6. National and Regional Reviews

The 2030 Agenda will be achieved in our communities, not in New York; hence, national review is the foundation of follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. The aim should be to have a global exchange on national experience. National review has three dimensions: at the national level, in a region and in New York.

The **first dimension** is the Voluntary National Review (VNR) as part of the HLPF, which will take place only

every 7 or 8 years on the basis of a report by the country concerned. What purpose will VNRs serve for countries and for the system? The Secretary-General says (A/70/684, para. 77) that “they aim to enable mutual learning across countries and regions and help all countries, in particular those being reviewed, to enhance their national policies and institutional frameworks and mobilize necessary support and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs.”

In preparing its report, a country has to be able to ask the questions relevant to its situation, and yet reports have to allow comparability so that others can learn. The template proposed in the Annex to the Secretary-General’s report goes in the right direction. We think that more could be done, however, to link the work of the whole UN system to national implementation through the process of national follow-up and review. The Secretary-General’s report suggests (A/70/684, para. 75) that the UN “stands ready to provide coherent support to the conduct of national reviews.” Developing countries may need logistical help in organizing periodic reviews, and everyone needs to be able at any time to extract data from a central database of reporting that can be sorted by country and by goal. Developing countries conducting a review will need help to synthesize and make sense of the vast amount of information. Periodic national reporting and review in many international organizations could be synchronized with the national review process both to reduce the burden on countries and to take advantage of work being done anyway.

With respect to the method for the VNRs, we assume that decisions have been or soon will be taken on the conduct of the first round of ministerial presentations in the HLPF. The resolution proposed for the General Assembly could leave flexibility to amend the process in light of experience in 2016. In thinking about possible models for the VNRs, the Secretary-General observes (A/70/684, para 77) that “the World Trade Organization Trade Policy Review Mechanism (TPRM) and the universal periodic review in the area of human rights provide useful insights on how to organize and support voluntary universal reviews,” but that is not what has been proposed. The Universal Periodic Review discusses an average of 1.4 countries per day, for 6 weeks every year. The WTO TPRM will conduct 22 reviews in 2016, consistent with a requirement to review every Member on an interval of two, four or six years, depending on its share of world trade. The WTO devotes one or two days to every review, which is based on

<sup>10</sup> Tipping, A. & Wolfe, R. (2015). *Trade and sustainable development: Options for follow-up and review of the trade-related elements of the Post-2015 Agenda and Financing for Development*. Retrieved from <https://www.iisd.org/library/trade-and-sustainable-development-options-follow-and-review-trade-related-elements-post-2015>



two reports. The first is written by the government of the country concerned. The second report is prepared by the WTO Secretariat, using a standard template, on the basis of interviews and exchanges with government officials, regular WTO notifications, reports by other international organizations and NGOs, and other sources of publicly available information. The Chairperson of the Trade Policy Review Body issues a summary of the discussions almost immediately, and the detailed minutes of the discussion follow later.

The HLPF cannot, in fact, emulate such an intensive process, but can it move in that direction? The Secretary-General recognizes (A/70/684, para. 82) that the HLPF “will not be able to listen to a long series of comprehensive presentations on national reviews. Recommendation 5 in his report mentions convening of (ad hoc, informal) meetings to prepare the review and presentations at the forum.” Would this proposal mean doing the main review work outside the formal eight days of the HLPF? Would a synthesis of the conclusions from such reviews be prepared for possible inclusion in the ministerial declaration or President’s summary, as appropriate?

Constant review prevents anybody from getting anything done, but reviews only every 7 or 8 years might be too few, with the risk that the long time lapse between reviews might adversely affect progress towards the SDGs. That means that countries should always be reflecting on what they have achieved. This **second dimension of national review** implies that countries should be conducting their own reviews, with one of them timed to be the basis of its VNR, which implies doing one perhaps every four years, with full support from the UN system as needed.

Finally *Transforming our World* recognizes (A/RES/70/1, para. 80) that peer learning at regional level, the **third dimension of national review**, could be useful for creating a conversation among countries in similar circumstances, allowing for learning about successes and difficulties. Review mechanisms exist in many regions. The regional forums on sustainable development play a particularly important role and could help bring together existing review mechanisms. Criteria for selecting bodies must apply to countries at all stages of development, consistent with paragraph 74 of A/RES/70/1, while recognizing that limited membership bodies, like the OECD, have special capacity to review their members’ contributions to the means of implementation.

Recommendation 6 in the Secretary-General’s report implies making use of regional reviews in preparing the national report for the HLPF. The Secretary-General may be reluctant to be too directive with respect to the work of other bodies, but could there be stronger encouragement for regional and other reviews, and not just in the VNR year? If the regional level becomes the main forum for peer learning, only aggregate reports would be needed for the HLPF.

## 7. Themes and Thematic Discussions

The HLPF should not be seen as a bureaucratic body with a standing agenda and a list of reports that must be considered and approved. It is meant to take a holistic view of the 2030 Agenda as something more than the sum of its parts, which is thought to require having an annual theme and a thematic focus to its reviews of progress on the SDGs. The Secretary-General recalls (A/70/684, para. 92) that resolution 67/290 provides that the HLPF “would have a thematic focus reflecting the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, in line with the thematic focus of the activities of ECOSOC.” The mandate for the thematic reviews (A/RES/70/1, para 85) is “to reflect the integrated nature of the Goals as well as the interlinkages between them.”

The theme/thematic distinction remains unclear, however, and the substance of both is a subject of debate. It was noted at a February retreat on follow-up and review that the HLPF is not the place for in-depth discussion on goals; instead, the HLPF needs to build on discussions held elsewhere and develop an integrated perspective. Some said at the retreat that reviewing all goals every year could lead to a lack of focus; others said that looking at groups of goals may re-create silos, ignoring linkages with the broader set of goals.

One way forward could be to recognize three realities that conflict with each other:

- Over a four-year cycle, the entire 2030 Agenda must be reviewed in the HLPF.
- The role of the HLPF is transversal not vertical.
- The annual agenda for the HLPF must have some focus if it is not to be unwieldy.

In the course of a four-year cycle culminating in the HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly, the HLPF should be able to articulate a holistic assessment



of progress towards sustainable development and the necessary next steps. But it cannot do all of that each year, which is the potential value of a theme. The theme, then, is first a way to draw cross-cutting connections through the dizzying array of bodies and reports sketched in Sections 4 and 5 above, providing a focus for a forward-looking discussions among ministers in the HLPF. While all goals ought to be kept in mind as part of the year's theme, only certain goals would be subject to thematic review, meaning "of or pertaining to a theme or themes." An annual focus in the HLPF on a few goals need not compromise the possibility of a comprehensive presentation of data on all goals in the annual SDG progress report and in the GSDR (even if it is only every four years).

The criteria the Secretary-General advances for choosing a theme (A/70/684, para. 101) make sense, but they are operational. What is the substantive basis for picking a theme? A theme ought to demonstrate that the 2030 Agenda is integrated. A good theme should be broad and relevant to many SDGs and aspects of the AAAA, and yet allow a sharp focus. It should require all bodies that must or that wish to submit reports to the HLPF to think hard about how their work relates to the theme. It should be something that ministers will see as important, on which they would wish to express their views.

One approach to *thematic review* of the SDGs, as suggested in the Secretary-General's report, is to take them in clusters of four every year, always with the addition of Goal 17. The result would be that all SDGs would be explicitly reviewed once in every four year cycle. For example, in 2019 the Secretary-General suggests (A/70/684, para 100) looking at Goals 3, 4, 5, 16, in support of an "annual theme for that year of Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness: peaceful and inclusive societies, human capital development, and gender equality." A different approach would be to look for a more focused theme. Could gender equality, for example, be a theme, and an organizing principle for thematic review, the basis for drawing a thread through all of the 2030 Agenda?

The quick response is that gender is covered by Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), so how could it be a theme as well? Start with the obvious points.

Goal 1. *End poverty in all its forms everywhere* suggests that all policies should be gender-sensitive.

Goal 2. *End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture* refers, among many other things, to the needs of lactating women.

Goal 3. *Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages* includes an explicit target on maternal health.

Goal 4. *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all* has an explicit gender dimension to its targets.

Goal 6. *Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all* includes an explicit target on the needs of women and girls.

Goal 8. *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all* requires special attention to the needs of women migrants.

Goal 10. *Reduce inequality within and among countries* has an implicit target of reducing inequality between men and women.

Goal 11. *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable* mentions special attention to the needs of women.

Experts would be able to find many more targets, and many aspects of the AAAA, that would need to be considered if gender were part of an annual theme. This example has the advantage—and disadvantage—of being a theme embedded in a specific goal. Despite this, the need to address the gender issue remains a key part of implementing many—if not all—of the other goals.

Other themes can be imagined, for example natural capital or ecosystem resilience. Environment—one of the three strands of sustainable development—does not have a goal of its own but is a key factor in all of them. The same is true of social development and the functioning of the economy. These issues are foundational, and they are transversal.

Key to managing the environmental strand is incorporating the notion of natural capital in all economic activity. Successful economic growth that takes place at the price of depleting natural capital is not sustainable. Similarly, economic and social progress that undermine the resilience of natural systems undermines its own success. Both of these factors are essential in making lasting progress across





all 17 goals, should be monitored closely and could be the focus for an annual theme. Can we think of other sets of focused cross-cutting themes that would provide a way to sequence necessary topics and inputs over a four-year cycle?

## 8. Output of the HLPF

Follow-up depends on an authoritative recording of the results of review. Every year at the level of ministers, the HLPF will produce “a negotiated ministerial declaration for inclusion in the ECOSOC report to the General Assembly” (A/67/290 para. 7). The 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” (A/67/290, para. 8). Both create the opportunity for a political statement at the highest levels on the overall assessment of progress towards sustainable development. The Secretary-General’s report also envisages (A/70/684, Recommendation 7) “a summary of the discussions by the President of the Economic and Social Council that would serve as proceedings of the forum, facilitating follow-up and review in subsequent years.”

Both the ministerial declaration, on political guidance from the HLPF, and the President’s summary, on operational follow-up, could be drafted in advance, reflecting preparatory discussions, perhaps in consultation with the Bureau or Permanent Representatives, while leaving space to capture aspects discussed by ministers. Much like the Chairperson’s summary after a WTO trade policy review, the President’s summary could highlight “the lessons learned and best practices, emerging trends and innovations, outstanding challenges and gaps, conclusions and recommendations, areas requiring support, commitments made by countries or other actors with regard to offering support as well as the next steps outlined by each country being reviewed” (A/70/684, para. 87).

The political guidance from ministers might, in addition to conclusions from the thematic discussion, focus on an overall assessment of progress towards sustainable development, and new or emerging issues with long-term implications. Among the questions that could be addressed by the President are:

- General lessons that emerge from the national and regional reviews, including on the means of implementation and necessary follow-up.
- The role of international organizations in generating

data or doing analysis for the HLPF.

- The national review process and whether it should be modified. Do countries at varying levels of development have access to sufficient resources to do the reports?

## 9. Questions About the Key Elements for Follow-Up and Review

This paper is intended as a contribution to informal consultations in New York as part of a process leading to a resolution in the General Assembly on follow-up and review for the 2030 Agenda. With that in mind, the following is a list of questions that might be helpful for participants in those consultations. It addresses the main elements that we see as important to include in the resolution.

### *HLPF agenda*

1. What would bring ministers to the HLPF? Would they be attracted by high-profile policy issues needing a political decision? Are there side events that would engage them?
2. How will progress towards sustainable development be recognized, from the standpoints of governments and of people affected? How will we know what follow-up is needed?
3. How can the HLPF agenda be seen as a coherent focal point for follow-up and review?
4. Does the eight-day meeting require a preparatory process, which might include a “friends of the chair” group working in consultation with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Bureau or, every fourth year, the President of the General Assembly?
5. Would it be useful for the Secretariat to prepare a matrix showing each block of HLPF time with the preparatory process and reports that it will need?

### *HLPF theme*

6. How can the annual theme provide a focus for the HLPF?
7. Does the annual theme need to be related to particular goals? Would a selection of cross-cutting themes provide a way to sequence necessary topics and inputs?



8. Should the HLPF/ECOSOC theme be selected on a rolling basis so that all parts of the UN system will always have a four-year lead to plan their work for a given theme?

#### *Role of other bodies*

9. How should other bodies be tasked with contributing to the work of the HLPF?
10. Should templates be developed on how to synthesize international organization reporting on goals or clusters of goals? Who will task other bodies?

#### *National reviews*

11. What problem is solved by the VNRs? Is that objective served only by ministerial presentations, or is a preparatory discussion needed?
12. Should there be a stronger encouragement for regional and other reviews, and not just in the VNR year?
13. Would a synthesis of the conclusions from VNRs be prepared for possible inclusion in the ministerial declaration or President's summary?

#### *Managing reporting for the HLPF*

14. Should a template be developed on how the flow of information to the HLPF can be organized and synthesized in a way that would allow capitals to brief ministers in preparation for their participation in the HLPF? Is a Secretariat database sufficient?
15. What evidence do ministers need to assess whether the efforts underway are appropriate, if progress is being made and the goals within reach?
16. Could the Secretariat prepare an annual paper that synthesizes all the material forwarded to the HLPF?

#### *HLPF output*

17. Should both the ministerial declaration, on political guidance from the HLPF, and the President's summary, on operational follow-up, be drafted in advance, reflecting preparatory discussions, perhaps in consultation with the Bureau or Permanent Representatives, while leaving space to capture aspects discussed by ministers?
18. Should the proposed summary by the President of ECOSOC draw on a synthesis of all the material sent to the HLPF, and should it be prepared in advance by the Secretariat?

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