

Options for the HLPF Review Mechanism

*Background for the 2nd Workshop
New York, May 15, 2014*

Introduction

On 20 February 2014, IISD organized a workshop on “Options for the HLPF Review Mechanism.” The workshop was co-sponsored by Switzerland, Norway, Egypt, Liechtenstein, Peru, Pakistan and the Republic of Korea. It offered the opportunity for a free-ranging and informal airing both of views concerning the proposed HLPF review mechanism and of the hopes and concerns of Member States. The workshop served as a means of gauging the issues important to Members and that would have to be addressed if the review mechanism is to function optimally.

While participants in the workshop made no attempt to reach any conclusions or agreements, IISD believes that a few parameters are nevertheless emerging:

The review mechanism must be owned and embraced by the participating countries and entities and must:

- Be based on positive learning, not simply showcasing success, but including causal analysis and an identification of what works and what doesn't.
- Be constructive, not finger-pointing.
- Seek to identify actions that are replicable and scalable.
- Include incentives to participate openly and fully.
- Include adequate arrangements for transparency and broad participation.
- Involve some measure of holding the countries and entities reviewed to account.

The review process must assess progress towards the sustainable development goals and the means of implementation together.

On the basis of this airing of views, it would appear useful to move forward towards a discussion of the options available for design of the HLPF review mechanism. While the first workshop looked at the broad spectrum of issues relating to the review mechanism for HLPF, there is a set of key questions that will need to be answered if the debate is to converge around a limited and realistic set of options for design of the review mechanism that can be placed on the negotiating table. To facilitate this second discussion, it might be useful to seek some convergence on the optimal answer to the following five key questions:

1. Who is to be reviewed, by whom and how often?

The resolution enabling HLPF mentions both States and UN entities as appropriate institutions. In respect of national reviews, who will conduct the review, and with what frequency? Should the HLPF itself commission the national reviews, or discuss the results of national reviews conducted at the regional level? In respect of UN entities, should the review process target the work of the full range of bodies relevant to sustainable development? Including those in the wider intergovernmental network (e.g., the World Bank, IMF, WTO)? Including regional intergovernmental bodies? Or should HLPF focus on aggregating the regular reviews conducted by the intergovernmental bodies themselves? Should the reviews be limited to global legal instruments relevant to sustainable development (e.g., MEAs, labour conventions, etc.) or commission one or several reviews covering a range of multilateral agreements, with a focus on how well they complement one another in pursuing their objectives?

Further, with over 190 Member States and potentially over 100 relevant entities subject to regular review, the question arises as to the frequency with which any one might be reviewed. The approach to this question has significant implications on cost and secretariat capacity and involves trade-offs between more rigorous reviews which 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 sustainable development goals and targets. Other approaches are also possible—for example, thematic reviews, or joint reviews of groups of countries in a given region.

2. What is to be reviewed?

The HLPF resolution is clear on this point: What is to be reviewed are the “*sustainable development commitments and objectives, including those related to the means of implementation, within the context of the post-2015 development agenda.*”

Nevertheless, within this broad scope, members will have to decide among a range of options:

- a) **Broad or narrow goals?** It is important to develop a list of things that countries can report on, that they will find useful when they receive comments from others, and that would enable an adequate degree of comparability among themselves. Should reviews focus broadly on the full range of commitments made by States, or on a standard subset of these commitments consistent with the SDGs and determined by level of development? 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 those expected to assist with funding, capacity and technology.
- b) **Impact or effort?** The challenge is to agree on the right mix of impact and effort indicators. Members will need to agree if the principal goal is to learn from best practice or to exercise accountability for commitments made. There are examples of both in the international system, with distinct pros and cons.

3. What might be the incentives to participate?

The HLPF resolution states that reviews shall be voluntary, so the question arises around the factors that will motivate a high level of participation in the review process. Ideally, the reviews should be seen as a valuable learning opportunity rather than a burden. The two-way nature of the review process, examining both national progress towards agreed goals and the availability of the “means of implementation,” suggests a strong need for widespread participation, and this may be a strong feature of the review process design. And of course, the more countries participate, the more their peers are likely to participate, and the more the reviews are seen as yielding useful lessons, the more incentive there will be to participate. Setting in motion this virtuous circle will depend to a large extent on the design of the review process, and to do so should be a key objective in finalizing the design.

4. What is the optimal approach for national and systemic reviews?

- a) **At the national level, should the approach be based on self-assessment? Independent reviewers? Peer review?**
There are many options for the organization and management of reviews, each with its attendant strengths and weaknesses. They carry variable implications in terms of cost and capacity—nationally and for the international system. And it is not clear whether discussion of reviews should take place only at the HLPF, in meeting of experts prior to the HLPF, or in some sort of regional forum.
- b) **Inputs to the reviews?** These are likely to include national reports as well as the consolidated reporting undertaken by different intergovernmental bodies but also inputs from civil society and others. Members will have to agree on the level of transparency and participation, and whether input from outside the governmental and intergovernmental world will be actively sought or passively accepted.
- c) **Beyond national reporting:** In addition to national reports and reviews of entities is there a need for review of progress towards aggregated goals expressed at the global level. For example, in addition to reporting on national efforts to phase out CFCs, is there a need to report on how the accumulation of national efforts is contributing to a global goal relating to protection of the ozone layer?

Further, with its mandate to track global progress towards sustainable development, HLPF will need to decide how the national or entity-based reviews feed into regular assessments on progress towards achievement of the SDGs and coherence among UN entities. Also possible is a “review of reviews” undertaken by other bodies.

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 endeavour?

The results of national reviews should primarily be useful to the subject of the review, and those of UN entities to those entities and their governing bodies. However, there are many other links that must be considered and many other processes and forums that could usefully benefit from the reviews, at least in their aggregate form. What crosswalks need to be built, for example, with the Global Sustainable Development Report and the agenda-setting role of the HLPF? How will the reviews undertaken by HLPF’s review mechanism relate to the many other thematic, organizational and national reviews that are routinely undertaken across the international sustainable development governance system? And how can these reviews be combined and streamlined to avoid “review fatigue”?

Final Note

The above five questions and the many sub-questions each of them contains represent, in IISD’s view, the key set of variables that will determine the final design and function of the HLPF review mechanism. The debate at the 15 May workshop aims to gauge the views of members on which combination of variables will strike the optimal balance among the many possible choices.

If these views appear to crystallize around a limited set of variables, it will be possible to prepare a set of design options that can then organize and structure the debate surrounding the review mechanism and contribute to the search for a consensus of members in respect of it.

Published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

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